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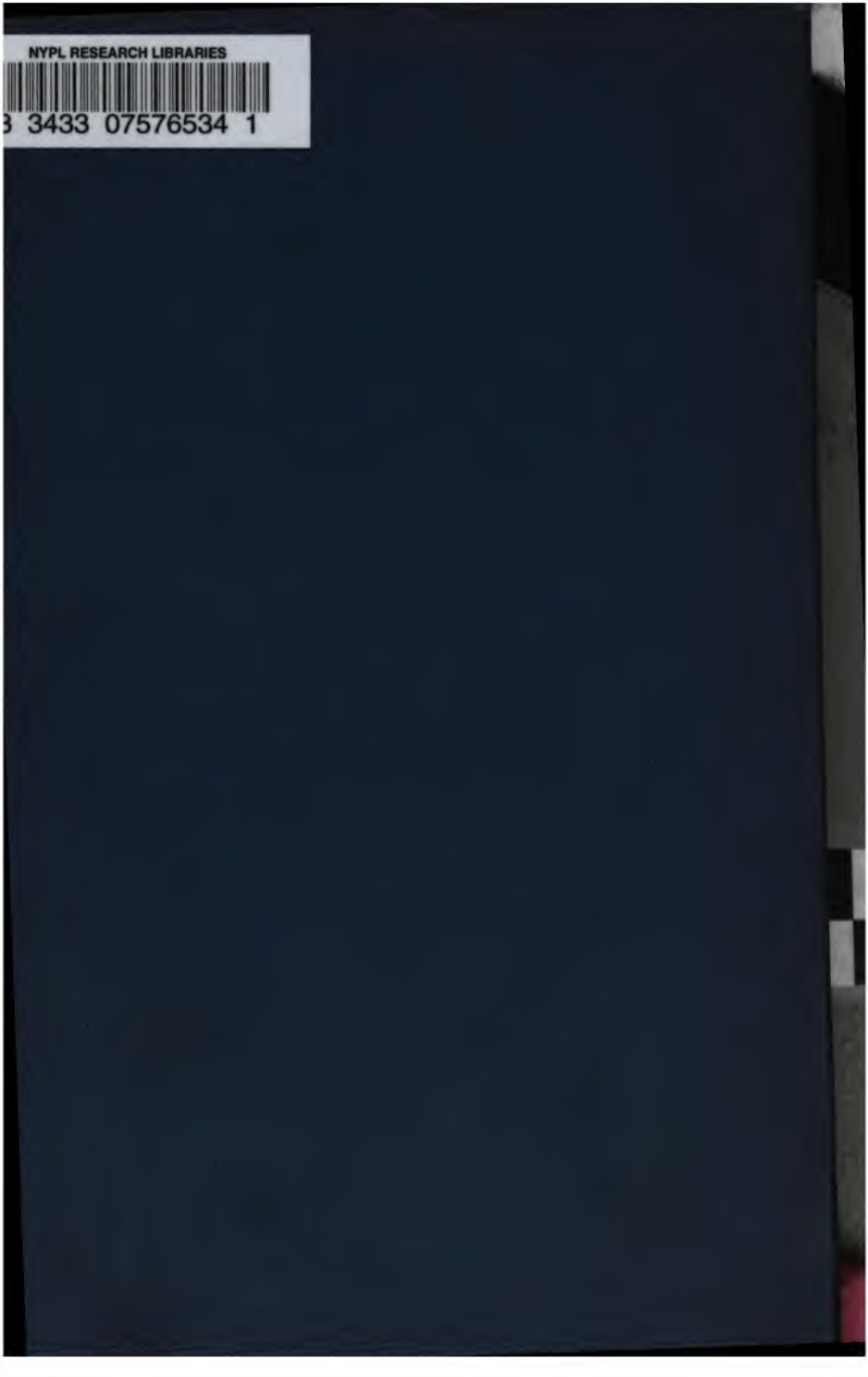
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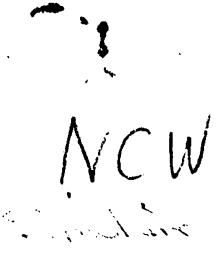
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[See p. 26

"Arthur lay at her feet and read aloud to her"

THE JUDGMENT OF EVE

BY

MAY SINCLAIR
AUTHOR OF
"The Divine Fire"

ILLUSTRATED



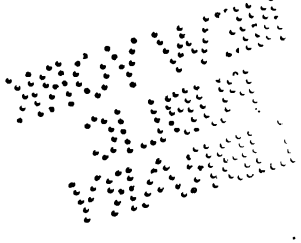
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ILLUSTRATIONS

"Arthur lay at her feet and read aloud to her" *Frontispiece*

"'John,' she said, suddenly, 'did you ever kill a pig?'" . . . *Facing p.* 14

"Over their cocoa he developed his theory of life" " 40

"'Quack, quack!' said Arthur, and it made the baby nearly choke with laughter" " 48

"She listened without a scruple, justified by her motherhood" " 70

"'Now, isn't it a pity for you to be going, dearie?'" " 80

"'There isn't an unsweet, unsound spot in one of them'" . . . " 102

"Thoughts came to him, terrible thoughts" " 118

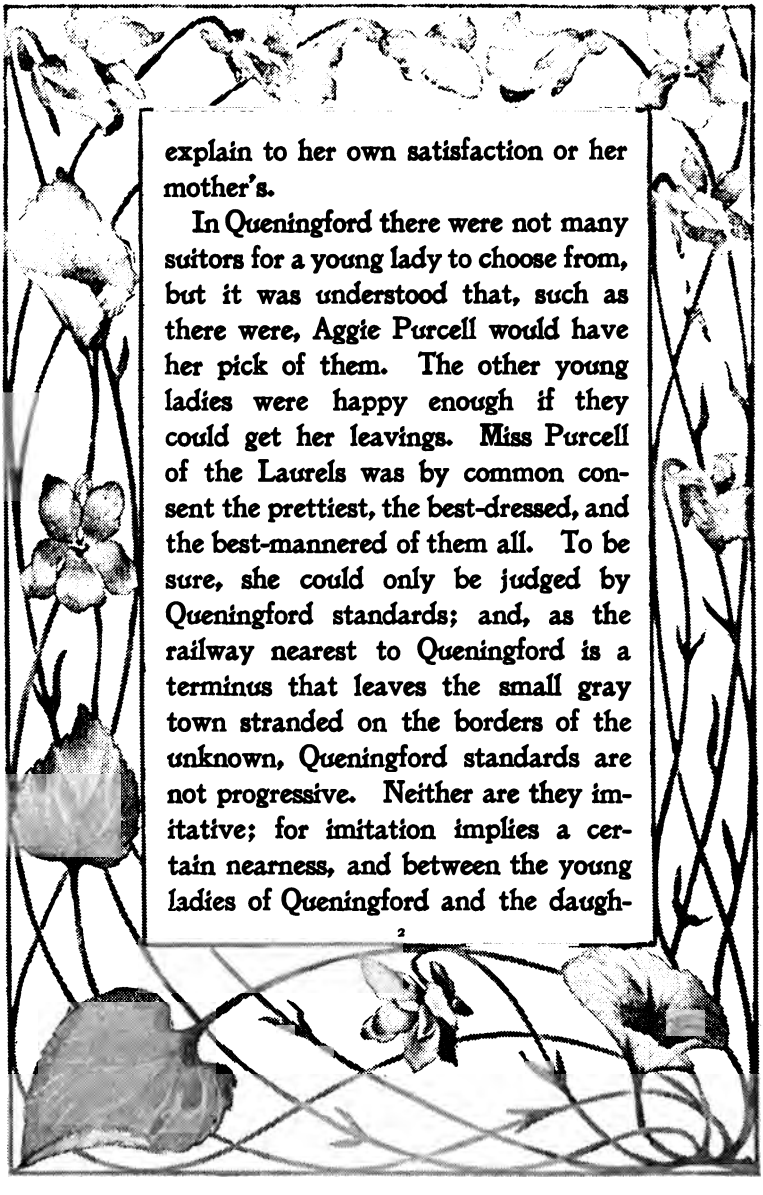
THE JUDGMENT OF EVE

"'I saw a ship a-sailing, a-sailing on the sea.'"—*Nursery Rhyme.*

THE JUDGMENT OF EVE

I

IT was market-day in Queningford. Aggie Purcell was wondering whether Mr. Hurst would look in that afternoon at the Laurels as he had looked in on other market-days. Supposing he did, and supposing Mr. Gatty were to look in, too, why then, Aggie said, it would be rather awkward. But whether awkward for herself, or for Mr. Gatty, or Mr. Hurst, or for all three of them together, Aggie was unable to



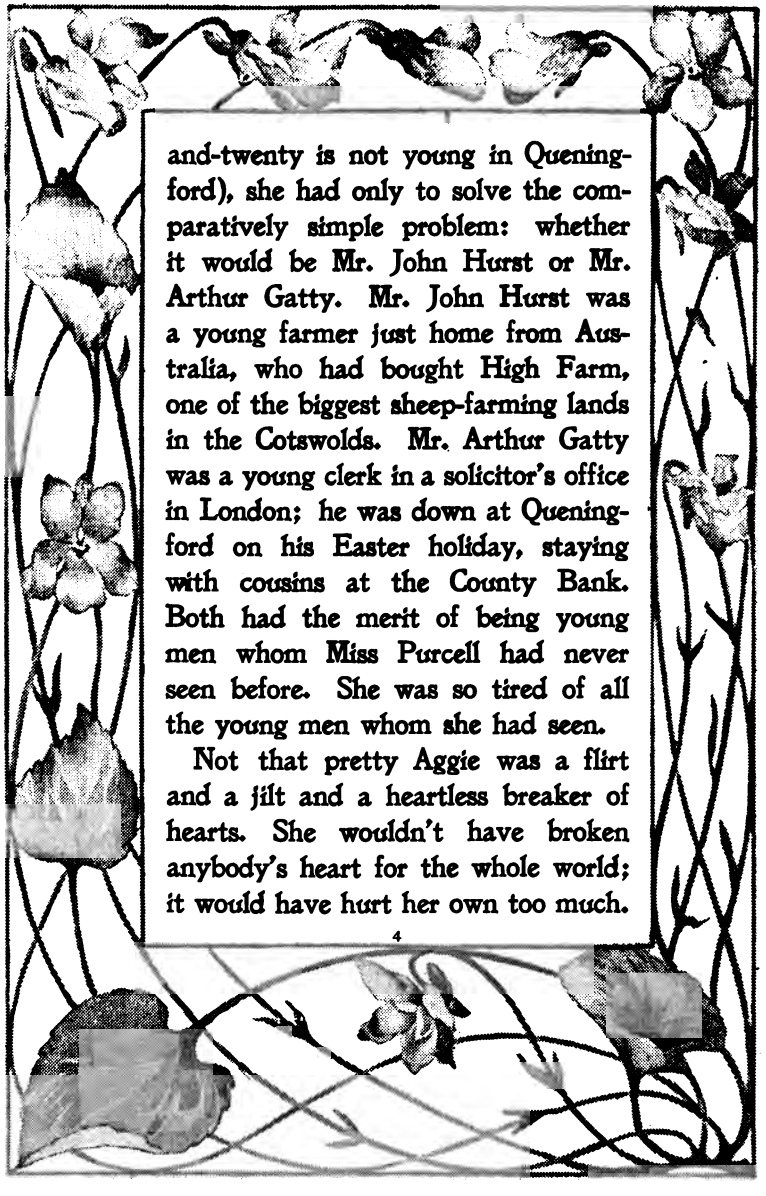
explain to her own satisfaction or her mother's.

In Queningford there were not many suitors for a young lady to choose from, but it was understood that, such as there were, Aggie Purcell would have her pick of them. The other young ladies were happy enough if they could get her leavings. Miss Purcell of the Laurels was by common consent the prettiest, the best-dressed, and the best-mannered of them all. To be sure, she could only be judged by Queningford standards; and, as the railway nearest to Queningford is a terminus that leaves the small gray town stranded on the borders of the unknown, Queningford standards are not progressive. Neither are they imitative; for imitation implies a certain nearness, and between the young ladies of Queningford and the daugh-

ters of the county there is an immeasurable void.

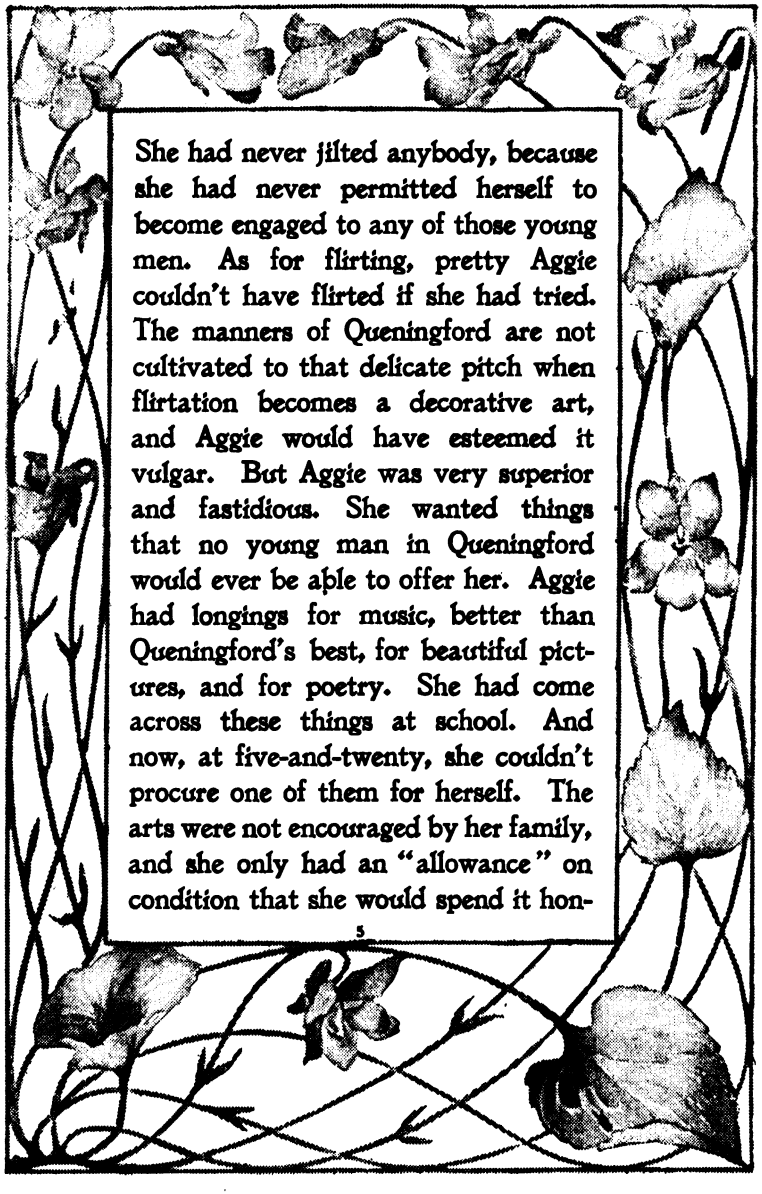
The absence of any effective rivalry made courtship a rather tame and uninteresting affair to Miss Purcell. She had only to make up her mind whether she would take the wine-merchant's son, or the lawyer's nephew, or the doctor's assistant, or, perhaps, it would be one of those mysterious enthusiasts who sometimes came into the neighborhood to study agriculture. Anyhow, it was a foregone conclusion that each of these doomed young men must pass through Miss Purcell's door before he knocked at any other.

Pretty Aggie was rather a long time in making up her mind. It could only be done by a slow process of elimination, till the embarrassing train of her adorers was finally reduced to two. At the age of five-and-twenty (five-



and-twenty is not young in Quening-ford), she had only to solve the comparatively simple problem: whether it would be Mr. John Hurst or Mr. Arthur Gatty. Mr. John Hurst was a young farmer just home from Australia, who had bought High Farm, one of the biggest sheep-farming lands in the Cotswolds. Mr. Arthur Gatty was a young clerk in a solicitor's office in London; he was down at Quening-ford on his Easter holiday, staying with cousins at the County Bank. Both had the merit of being young men whom Miss Purcell had never seen before. She was so tired of all the young men whom she had seen.

Not that pretty Aggie was a flirt and a jilt and a heartless breaker of hearts. She wouldn't have broken anybody's heart for the whole world; it would have hurt her own too much.



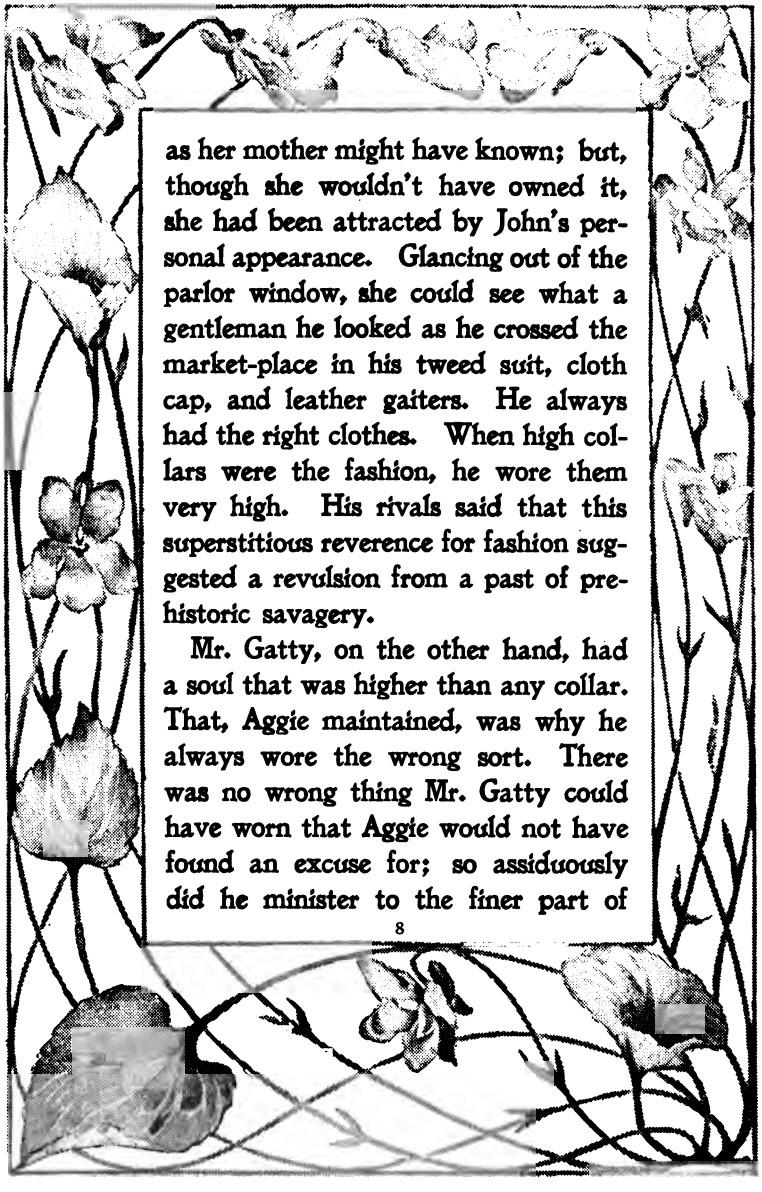
She had never jilted anybody, because she had never permitted herself to become engaged to any of those young men. As for flirting, pretty Aggie couldn't have flirted if she had tried. The manners of Queningford are not cultivated to that delicate pitch when flirtation becomes a decorative art, and Aggie would have esteemed it vulgar. But Aggie was very superior and fastidious. She wanted things that no young man in Queningford would ever be able to offer her. Aggie had longings for music, better than Queningford's best, for beautiful pictures, and for poetry. She had come across these things at school. And now, at five-and-twenty, she couldn't procure one of them for herself. The arts were not encouraged by her family, and she only had an "allowance" on condition that she would spend it hon-

orably in clothes. Of course, at five-and-twenty, she knew all the "pieces" and songs that her friends knew, and they knew all hers. She had read all the romantic fiction in the lending library, and all the works of light popular science, and still lighter and more popular theology, besides borrowing all the readable books from the vicarage. She had exhausted Queningford. It had no more to give her.

Queningford would have considered that a young lady who could do all that had done enough to prove her possession of brains. Not that Queningford had ever wanted her to prove it; its young men, at any rate, very much preferred that she should leave her brains and theirs alone. And Aggie had brains enough to be aware of this; and being a very well-behaved young lady, and anxious to

please, she had never mentioned any of her small achievements. Nature, safeguarding her own interests, had whispered to Aggie that young ladies who live in Queningford are better without intellects that show.

Now, John Hurst was sadly akin to the young men of Queningford, in that he was unable to offer her any of the things which, Aggie felt, belonged to the finer part of her that she dared not show. On the other hand, he could give her (beside himself), a good income, a good house, a horse to ride, and a trap to drive in. To marry him, as her mother pointed out to her, would be almost as good as "getting in with the county." Not that Mrs. Purcell offered this as an inducement. She merely threw it out as a vague contribution to the subject. Aggie didn't care a rap about the county,



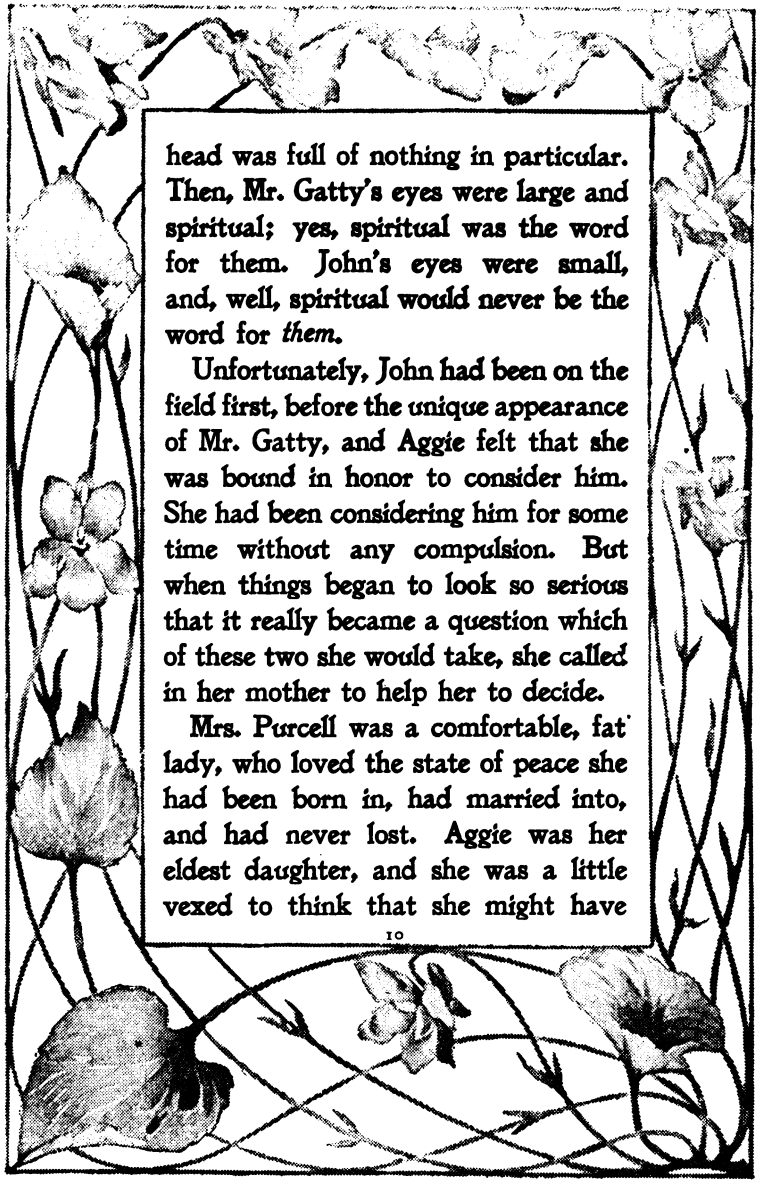
as her mother might have known; but, though she wouldn't have owned it, she had been attracted by John's personal appearance. Glancing out of the parlor window, she could see what a gentleman he looked as he crossed the market-place in his tweed suit, cloth cap, and leather gaiters. He always had the right clothes. When high collars were the fashion, he wore them very high. His rivals said that this superstitious reverence for fashion suggested a revulsion from a past of prehistoric savagery.

Mr. Gatty, on the other hand, had a soul that was higher than any collar. That, Aggie maintained, was why he always wore the wrong sort. There was no wrong thing Mr. Gatty could have worn that Aggie would not have found an excuse for; so assiduously did he minister to the finer part of

her. He shared all her tastes. If she admired a picture or a piece of music or a book, Mr. Gatty had admired it ever since he was old enough to admire anything. She was sure that he admired her more for admiring them. She wasn't obliged to hide those things from Mr. Gatty; besides, what would have been the use? There was nothing in the soul of Aggie that Mr. Gatty had not found out and understood, and she felt that there would be no limit to his understanding.

But what she liked best about him was his gentleness. She had never seen any young man so gentle as Mr. Gatty.

And his face was every bit as nice as John's. Nicer, for it was excessively refined, and John's wasn't. You could see that his head was full of beautiful thoughts, whereas John's



head was full of nothing in particular. Then, Mr. Gatty's eyes were large and spiritual; yes, spiritual was the word for them. John's eyes were small, and, well, spiritual would never be the word for *them*.

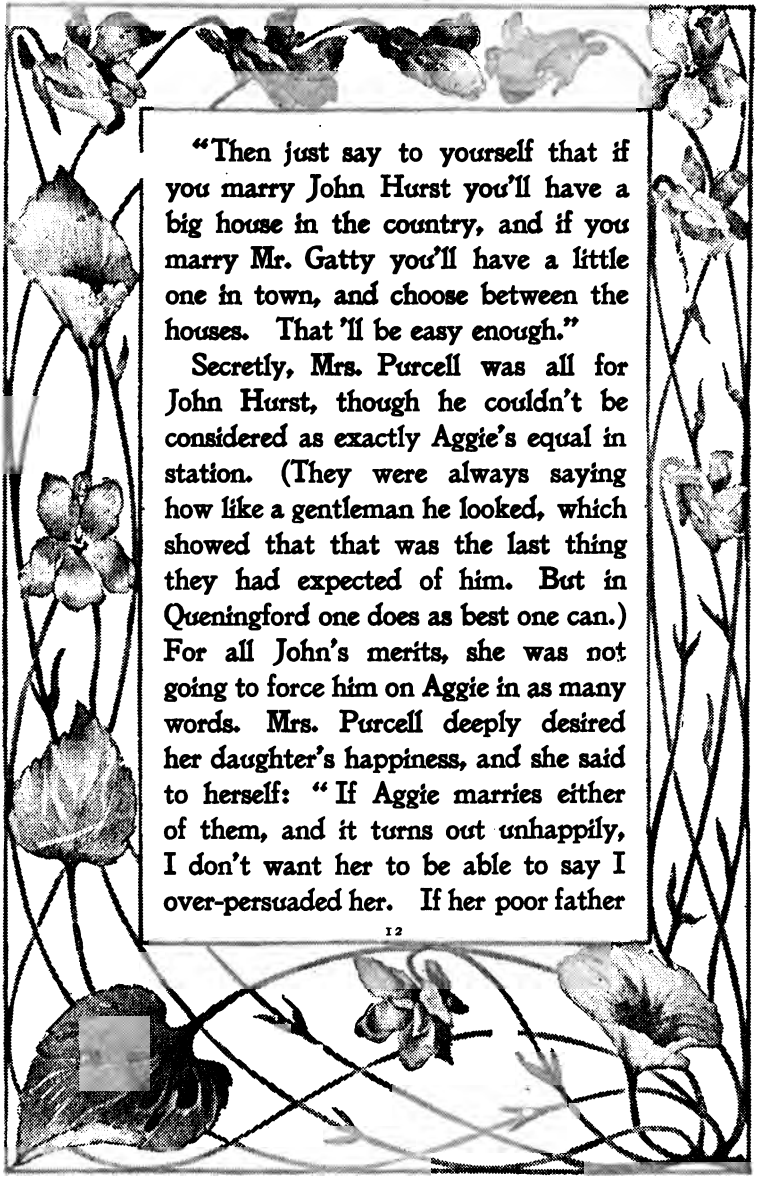
Unfortunately, John had been on the field first, before the unique appearance of Mr. Gatty, and Aggie felt that she was bound in honor to consider him. She had been considering him for some time without any compulsion. But when things began to look so serious that it really became a question which of these two she would take, she called in her mother to help her to decide.

Mrs. Purcell was a comfortable, fat lady, who loved the state of peace she had been born in, had married into, and had never lost. Aggie was her eldest daughter, and she was a little vexed to think that she might have

married five years ago if she hadn't been so particular. Meanwhile, what with her prettiness and her superiority, she was spoiling her younger sisters' chances. None of her rejected suitors had ever turned to Kate or Susie or Eliza. They were well enough, poor girls, but as long as Aggie was there they couldn't help looking plain. But as for deciding between John Hurst and Mr. Gatty, Mrs. Purcell couldn't do it. And when Aggie said, in her solemn way, "Mother, I think it's coming; and I don't know how to choose between them," her mother had nothing to say but:

"You must use your own judgment, my dear."

"My own judgment? I wonder if I really have any? You see, I feel as if I liked them both about the same."



"Then just say to yourself that if you marry John Hurst you'll have a big house in the country, and if you marry Mr. Gatty you'll have a little one in town, and choose between the houses. That 'll be easy enough."

Secretly, Mrs. Purcell was all for John Hurst, though he couldn't be considered as exactly Aggie's equal in station. (They were always saying how like a gentleman he looked, which showed that that was the last thing they had expected of him. But in Queningford one does as best one can.) For all John's merits, she was not going to force him on Aggie in as many words. Mrs. Purcell deeply desired her daughter's happiness, and she said to herself: "If Aggie marries either of them, and it turns out unhappily, I don't want her to be able to say I over-persuaded her. If her poor father

were alive, *he'd* have known how to advise her."

Then, all of a sudden, without anybody's advice, John was eliminated, too. It was not Aggie's doing. In fact, he may be said to have eliminated himself. It happened in this way:

Mr. Hurst had been taking tea with Aggie one market-day. The others were all out, and he had the field to himself. She always remembered just how he looked when he did it. He was standing on the white mohair rug in the drawing-room, and was running his fingers through his hair for the third time. He had been telling her how he had first taken up sheep-farming in Australia, how he'd been a farm-hand before that in California, how he'd always set his mind on that one thing—sheep-farming—because he had been born and bred

in the Cotswolds. Aggie's dark-blue eyes were fixed on him, serious and intent. That flattered him, and the gods, for his undoing, dowered him with a disastrous fluency.

He had a way of thrusting out his jaw when he talked, and Aggie noted the singular determination of his chin. It was so powerful as to be almost brutal. (The same could certainly not be said of Mr. Gatty's.)

Then, in the light of his reminiscences, a dreadful thought came to her.

"John," she said, suddenly, "did you ever kill a pig?"

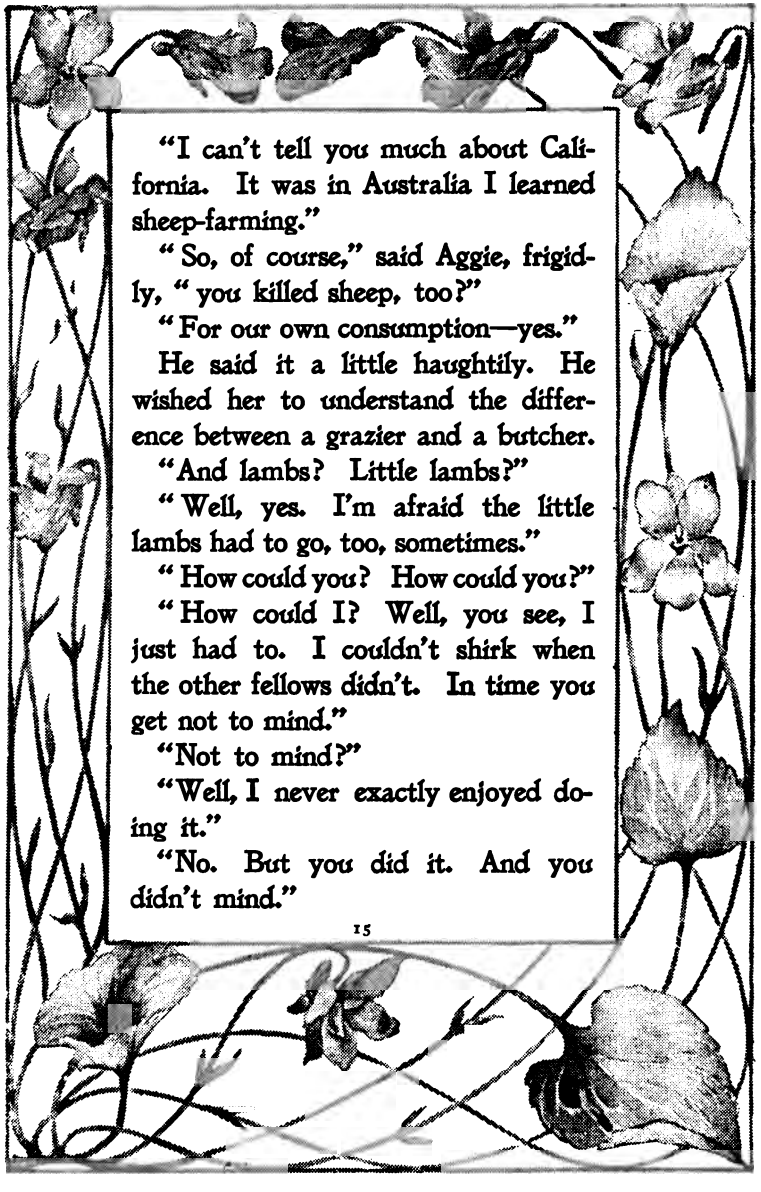
He answered, absently, as was his way when directly addressed.

"A pig? Yes, I've killed one or two in California."

She drew back in her chair; but, as she still gazed at him, he went on, well pleased:



"'John," she said, suddenly, 'did you ever kill a pig?'"



"I can't tell you much about California. It was in Australia I learned sheep-farming."

"So, of course," said Aggie, frigidly, "you killed sheep, too?"

"For our own consumption—yes."

He said it a little haughtily. He wished her to understand the difference between a grazier and a butcher.

"And lambs? Little lambs?"

"Well, yes. I'm afraid the little lambs had to go, too, sometimes."

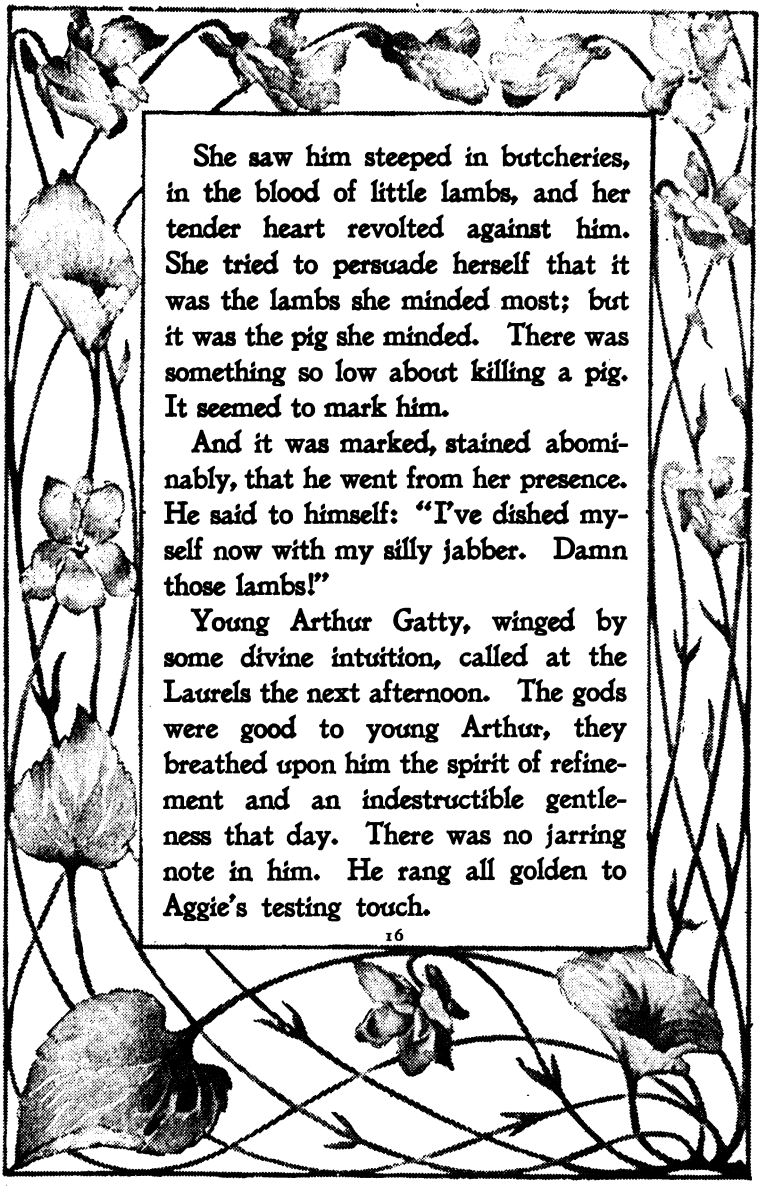
"How could you? How could you?"

"How could I? Well, you see, I just had to. I couldn't shirk when the other fellows didn't. In time you get not to mind."

"Not to mind?"

"Well, I never exactly enjoyed doing it."

"No. But you did it. And you didn't mind."



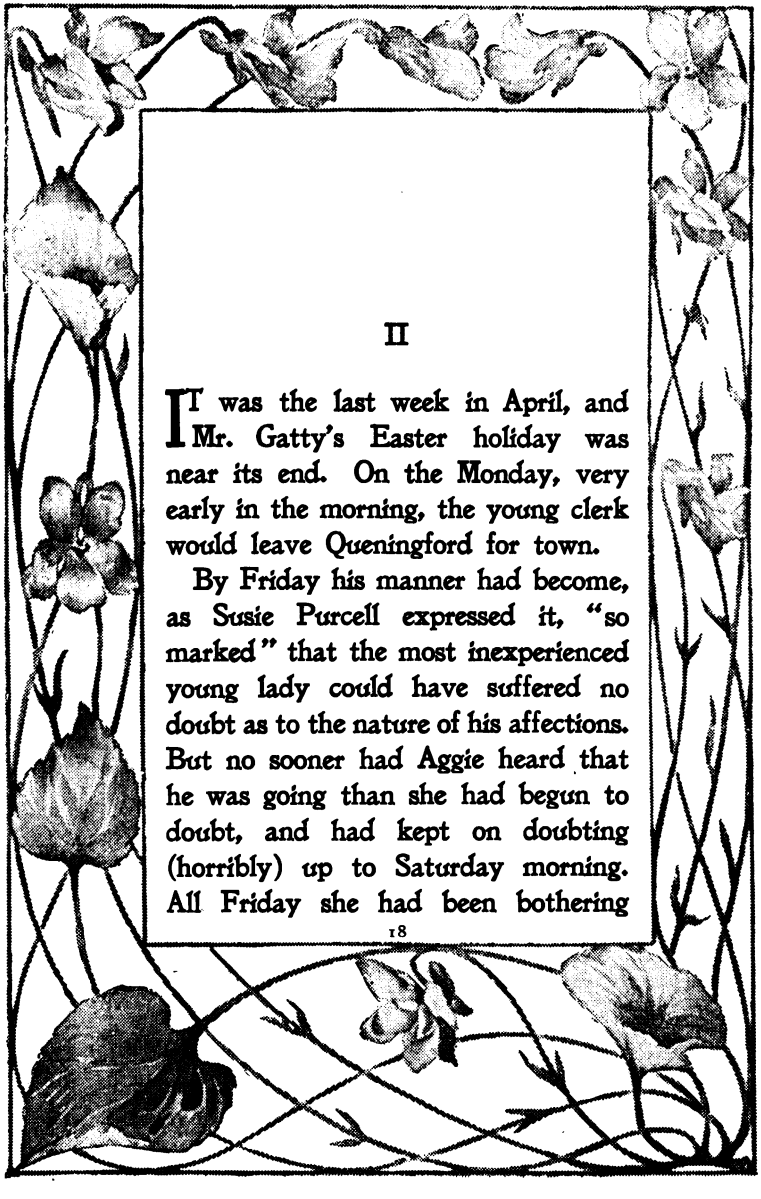
She saw him steeped in butcheries, in the blood of little lambs, and her tender heart revolted against him. She tried to persuade herself that it was the lambs she minded most; but it was the pig she minded. There was something so low about killing a pig. It seemed to mark him.

And it was marked, stained abominably, that he went from her presence. He said to himself: "I've dished myself now with my silly jabber. Damn those lambs!"

Young Arthur Gatty, winged by some divine intuition, called at the Laurels the next afternoon. The gods were good to young Arthur, they breathed upon him the spirit of refinement and an indestructible gentleness that day. There was no jarring note in him. He rang all golden to Aggie's testing touch.

When he had gone a great calm settled upon her. It was all so simple now. Nobody was left but Arthur Gatty. She had just got to make up her mind about *him*—which would take a little time—and then—either she was a happy married woman or, said Aggie, coyly, a still happier old maid in Queningford forever.

It was surprising how little the alternative distressed her.



II

IT was the last week in April, and Mr. Gatty's Easter holiday was near its end. On the Monday, very early in the morning, the young clerk would leave Queningford for town.

By Friday his manner had become, as Susie Purcell expressed it, "so marked" that the most inexperienced young lady could have suffered no doubt as to the nature of his affections. But no sooner had Aggie heard that he was going than she had begun to doubt, and had kept on doubting (horribly) up to Saturday morning. All Friday she had been bothering

Susie. Did Susie think there was any one in town whom he was in a hurry to get back to? Did Susie think such a man as Mr. Gatty could think twice about a girl like her? Did Susie think he only thought her a forward little minx? Or did she think he really *was* beginning to care? And Susie said: "You goose! How do I know, if you don't? He hasn't said anything to me."

And on Saturday morning Aggie all but knew. For that day he asked permission to take her for a drive, having borrowed a trap for the purpose.

They drove up to a northern slope of the Cotswolds, by a road that took them past High Farm; and there they found John Hurst superintending his sheep-shearing. Aggie, regardless of his feelings, insisted on getting out of the trap and looking on. John talked

all the time to the shepherd, while Arthur talked to Aggie, and Aggie, cruel little Aggie, made remarks about the hard-heartedness of shearers.

Arthur ("that bald-faced young Cockney snob," as John called him) was depressed by the dominating presence of his rival and his visible efficiency. He looked long and thoughtfully at the sheep-shearing.

"Boni pastoris est," he observed, "tondere oves, non deglubere."

Aggie shook her pretty head, as much as to say Latin was beyond her; and he was kind enough to translate. "It is the part of a good shepherd to shear, not flay, the sheep."

"Is that from Virgil?" she asked, looking up into his face with a smile of unstained intellectual innocence.

A terrific struggle arose in young Arthur's breast. If he said it was

from Virgil (it was a thousand to one against her knowing), he might leap into her love at one high bound. If he said he didn't know where it came from before it got into his Latin exercise, he would be exactly where he was before, which, he reflected, dismally, was nowhere. Whereas, that fellow Hurst was forever on the spot.

On the other hand, where would he be if — if — supposing that she ever found him out?

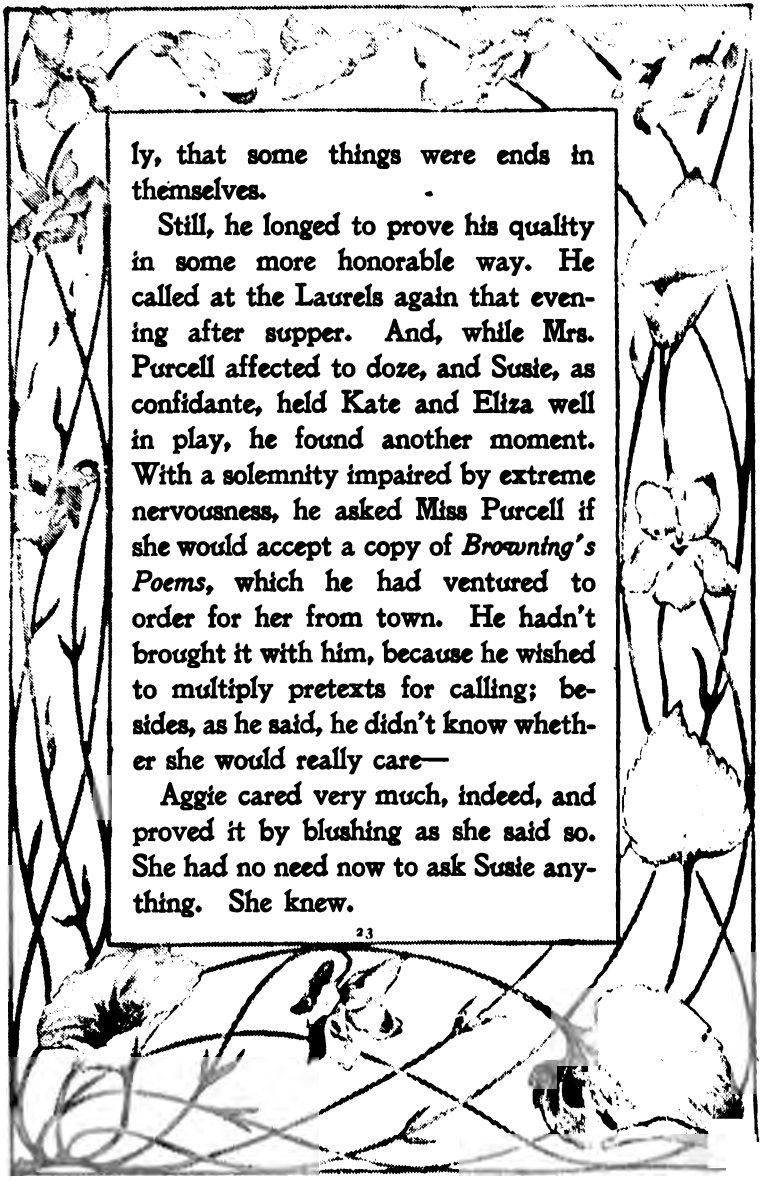
A thousand to one against it. He who aims high must take high risks. He took them.

"Yes," he said, "it's Virgil." And he added, to clinch the matter, "From the 'Georgics.'"

The light in her believing eyes told him how inspired he had been.

The more he thought of it the more likely it seemed. A flash of reminis-

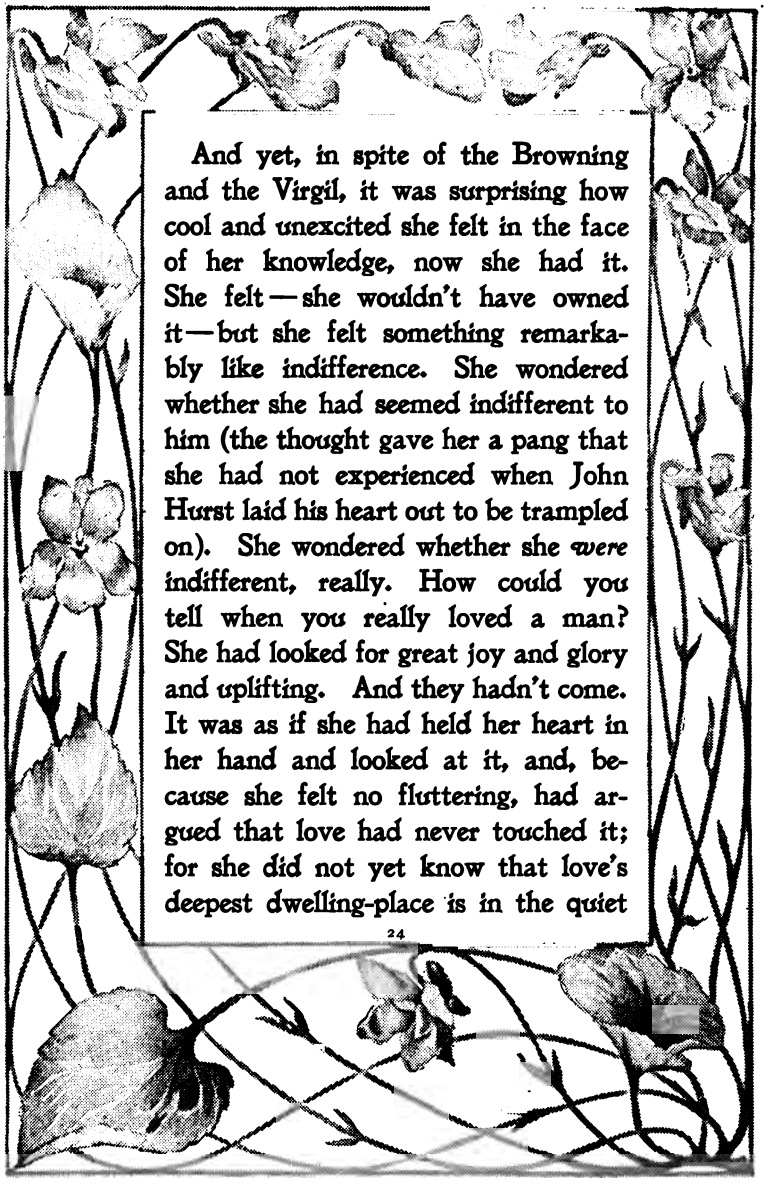
cence from his school-days visited him; he remembered that Virgil did write some things called "Georgics," and that Georgics were a kind of pastoral, and that pastorals always had sheep in them, and shepherds. It was a good risk, anyhow, and he could see that it was justified by success. When his conscience reproached him for pretending he knew more Latin than he did, he told it that he would soon know heaps. If all by himself, in cold blood, and for no particular reason, he could keep slogging away at a difficult language evening after evening, what couldn't he do with Aggie's love as an incentive? Why, he could learn enough Latin to read Virgil in two months, and to teach Aggie, too. And if any one had asked him what good that would do either of them, he would have replied, contemptuous-



ly, that some things were ends in themselves.

Still, he longed to prove his quality in some more honorable way. He called at the Laurels again that evening after supper. And, while Mrs. Purcell affected to doze, and Susie, as confidante, held Kate and Eliza well in play, he found another moment. With a solemnity impaired by extreme nervousness, he asked Miss Purcell if she would accept a copy of *Browning's Poems*, which he had ventured to order for her from town. He hadn't brought it with him, because he wished to multiply pretexts for calling; besides, as he said, he didn't know whether she would really care—

Aggie cared very much, indeed, and proved it by blushing as she said so. She had no need now to ask Susie anything. She knew.



And yet, in spite of the Browning and the Virgil, it was surprising how cool and unexcited she felt in the face of her knowledge, now she had it. She felt — she wouldn't have owned it — but she felt something remarkably like indifference. She wondered whether she had seemed indifferent to him (the thought gave her a pang that she had not experienced when John Hurst laid his heart out to be trampled on). She wondered whether she *were* indifferent, really. How could you tell when you really loved a man? She had looked for great joy and glory and uplifting. And they hadn't come. It was as if she had held her heart in her hand and looked at it, and, because she felt no fluttering, had argued that love had never touched it; for she did not yet know that love's deepest dwelling-place is in the quiet

heart. Aggie had never loved before, and she thought that she was in the sanctuary on Saturday, when she was only standing on the threshold, waiting for her hour.

It came, all of a sudden, on the Sunday.

Aggie's memory retained every detail of that blessed day—a day of spring sunshine, warm with the breath of wall-flowers and violets. Arthur, walking in the garden with her, was so mixed up with those delicious scents that Aggie could never smell them afterwards without thinking of him. A day that was not only all wall-flowers and violets, but all Arthur. For Arthur called first thing before breakfast to bring her the Browning, and first thing after breakfast to go with her to church, and first thing after dinner to take her for a walk.

They went into the low-lying Quenington fields beside the river. They took the Browning with them; Arthur carried it under his arm. In his loose, gray overcoat and soft hat he looked like a poet himself, or a Socialist, or Something. He always looked like Something. As for Aggie, she had never looked prettier than she looked that day. He had never known before how big and blue her eyes were, nor that her fawn-colored hair had soft webs of gold all over it. She, in her clean new clothes, was like a young Spring herself, all blue and white and green, dawn-rose and radiant gold. The heart of the young man was quick with love of her.

They found a sheltered place for Aggie to sit in, while Arthur lay at her feet and read aloud to her. He read "Abt Vogler," "Prospice," selections

from "The Death in the Desert" (the day being Sunday); and then, with a pause and a shy turning of the leaves, and a great break in his voice, "Oh, Lyric Love, Half Angel and Half Bird," through to the end.

Their hearts beat very fast in the silence afterwards.

He turned to the fly-leaf where he had inscribed her name.

"I should like to have written something more. May I?"

"Oh yes. Please write anything you like."

And now the awful question for young Arthur was: Whatever should he write? "With warmest regards" was too warm; "kind regards" were too cold; "good wishes" sounded like Christmas or a birthday; "remembrances" implied that things were at

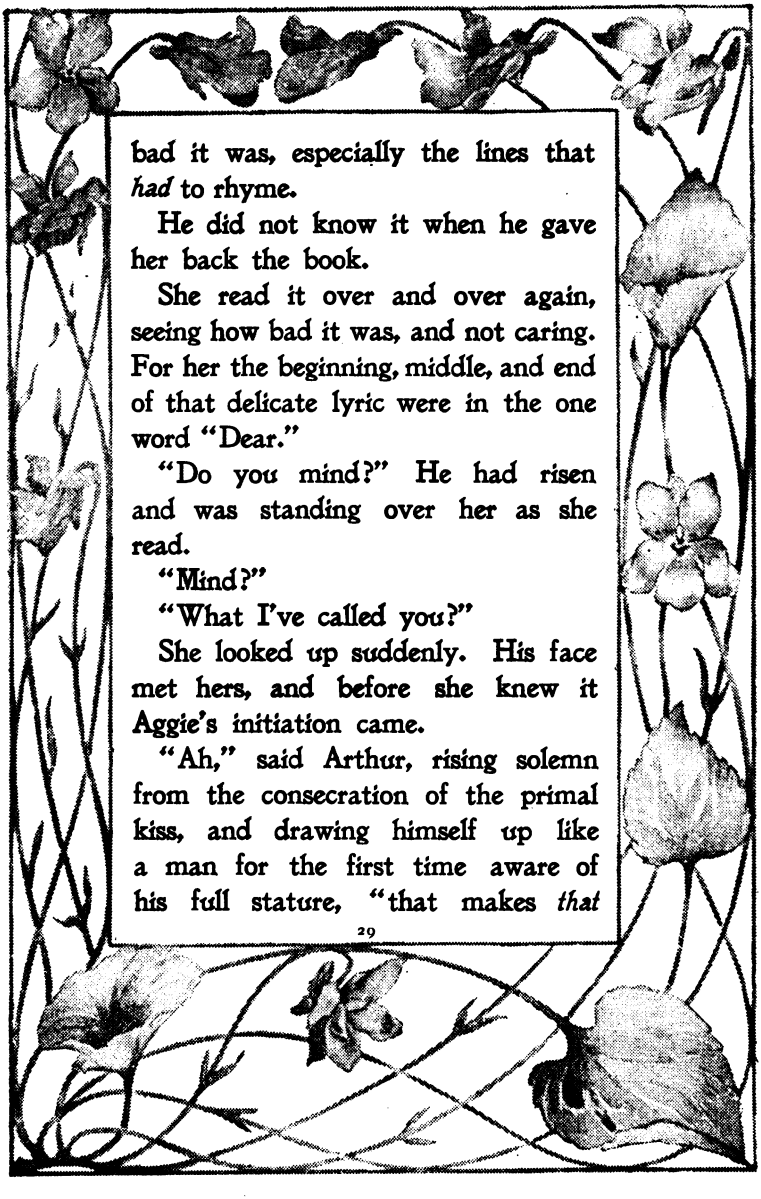
an end instead of a beginning. All these shades, the warmth, the reticence, the inspired audacity, might be indicated under the veil of verse. If he dared—

"I wish," said Aggie, "you'd write me something of your own." (She knew he did it.)

What more could he want than that she should divine him thus?

For twenty minutes (he thought they were only seconds), young Arthur lay flat on his stomach and brooded over the Browning. Aggie sat quiet as a mouse, lest the rustle of her gown should break the divine enchantment. At last it came.

"Dear, since you loved this book, it is your own—" That was how it began. Long afterwards Arthur would turn pale when he thought of how it went on; for it was wonderful how



bad it was, especially the lines that *had* to rhyme.

He did not know it when he gave her back the book.

She read it over and over again, seeing how bad it was, and not caring. For her the beginning, middle, and end of that delicate lyric were in the one word "Dear."

"Do you mind?" He had risen and was standing over her as she read.

"Mind?"

"What I've called you?"

She looked up suddenly. His face met hers, and before she knew it Aggie's initiation came.

"Ah," said Arthur, rising solemn from the consecration of the primal kiss, and drawing himself up like a man for the first time aware of his full stature, "that makes *that*

seem pretty poor stuff, doesn't it?"

Young Arthur had just looked upon Love himself, and for that moment his vision was purged of vanity.

"Not Browning?" asked Aggie, a little anxiously.

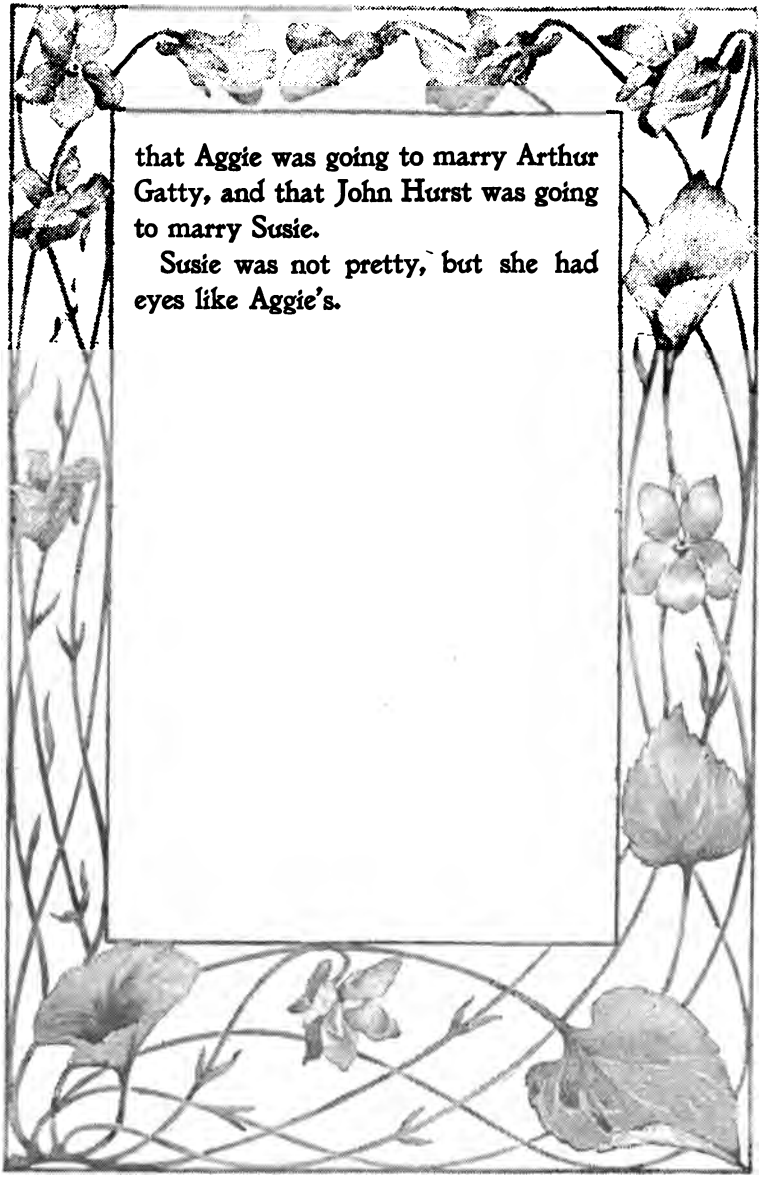
"No— Not Browning. Me. Browning could write poetry. I can't. I know that now."

And she knew it, too; but that made no difference. It was not for his poetry she loved him.

"And so," said her mother, after Arthur had stayed for tea and supper, and said his good-bye and gone—"so that's the man you've been waiting for all this time?"

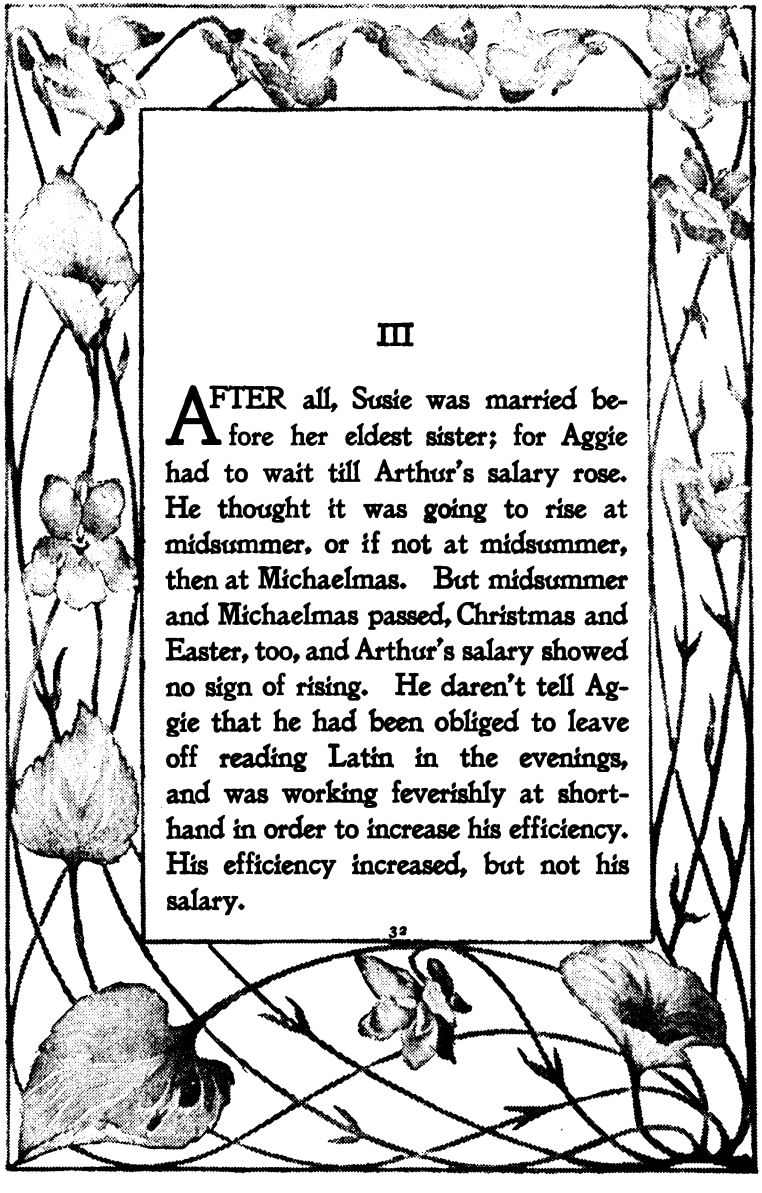
"Yes, that's the man I've been waiting for," said Aggie.

Three days later Queningford knew



that Aggie was going to marry Arthur Gatty, and that John Hurst was going to marry Susie.

Susie was not pretty, but she had eyes like Aggie's.



III

AFTER all, Susie was married before her eldest sister; for Aggie had to wait till Arthur's salary rose. He thought it was going to rise at midsummer, or if not at midsummer, then at Michaelmas. But midsummer and Michaelmas passed, Christmas and Easter, too, and Arthur's salary showed no sign of rising. He daren't tell Aggie that he had been obliged to leave off reading Latin in the evenings, and was working feverishly at shorthand in order to increase his efficiency. His efficiency increased, but not his salary.

Meanwhile he spent all his holidays at Queningford, and Aggie had been twice to town. They saw so little of each other that every meeting was a divine event, a spiritual adventure. If each was not exactly an undiscovered country to the other, there was always some territory left over from last time, endlessly alluring to the pilgrim lover. Whenever Arthur found in Aggie's mind a little bare spot that needed cultivating, he planted there a picture or a poem, that instantly took root, and began to bloom as it had never (to his eyes) bloomed in any other soil. Aggie, for her part, yielded all the treasure of her little kingdom as tribute to the empire that had won her.

Many things were uncertain, the rise of Arthur's salary among them; but of one thing they were sure, that

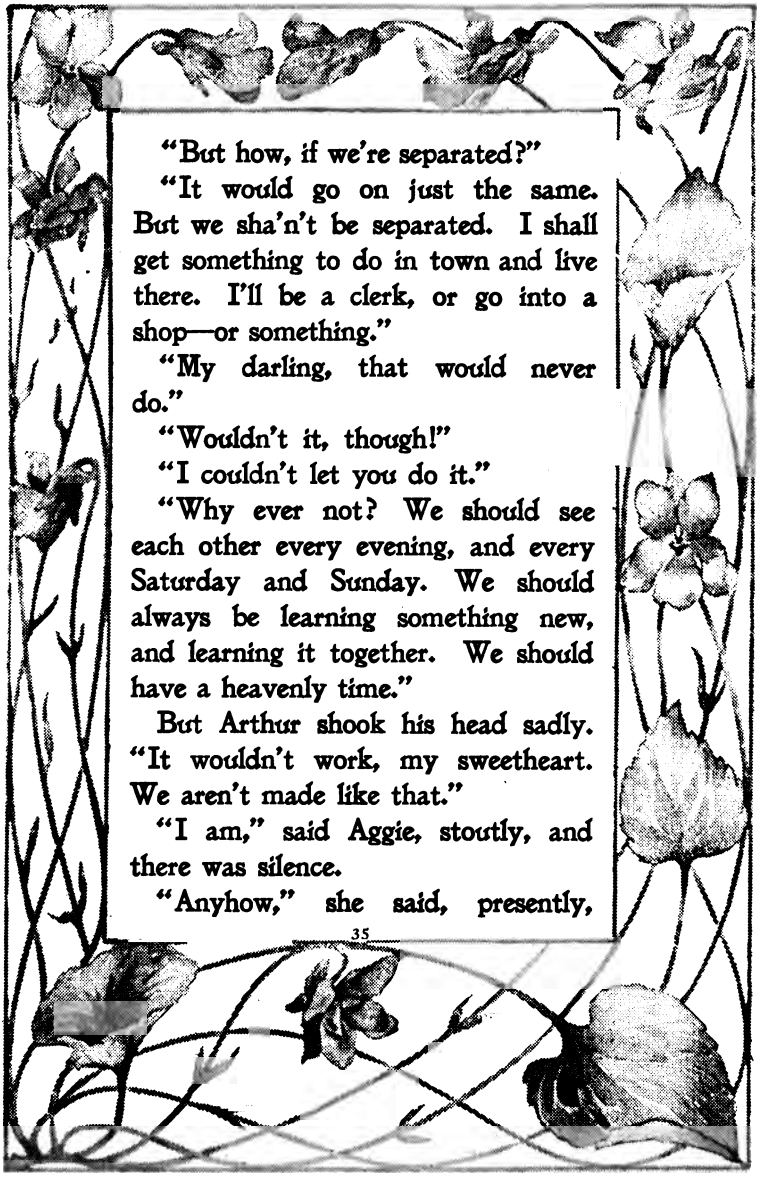
they would lead the intellectual life together. Whatever happened, they would keep it up.

They were keeping it up as late as August, when Arthur came down for the Bank Holiday. He was still enthusiastic, but uncertainty had dimmed his hope. Marriage had become a magnificent phantasm, superimposed upon a dream, a purely supposititious rise of salary. The prospect had removed itself so far in time that it had parted with its substance, like an object retired modestly into space.

They were walking together in the Queningford fields, when Arthur stopped suddenly and turned to her.

"Aggie," he said, "supposing, after all, we can never marry?"

"Well," said Aggie, calmly, "if we don't we shall still lead our real life together."



"But how, if we're separated?"

"It would go on just the same. But we sha'n't be separated. I shall get something to do in town and live there. I'll be a clerk, or go into a shop—or something."

"My darling, that would never do."

"Wouldn't it, though!"

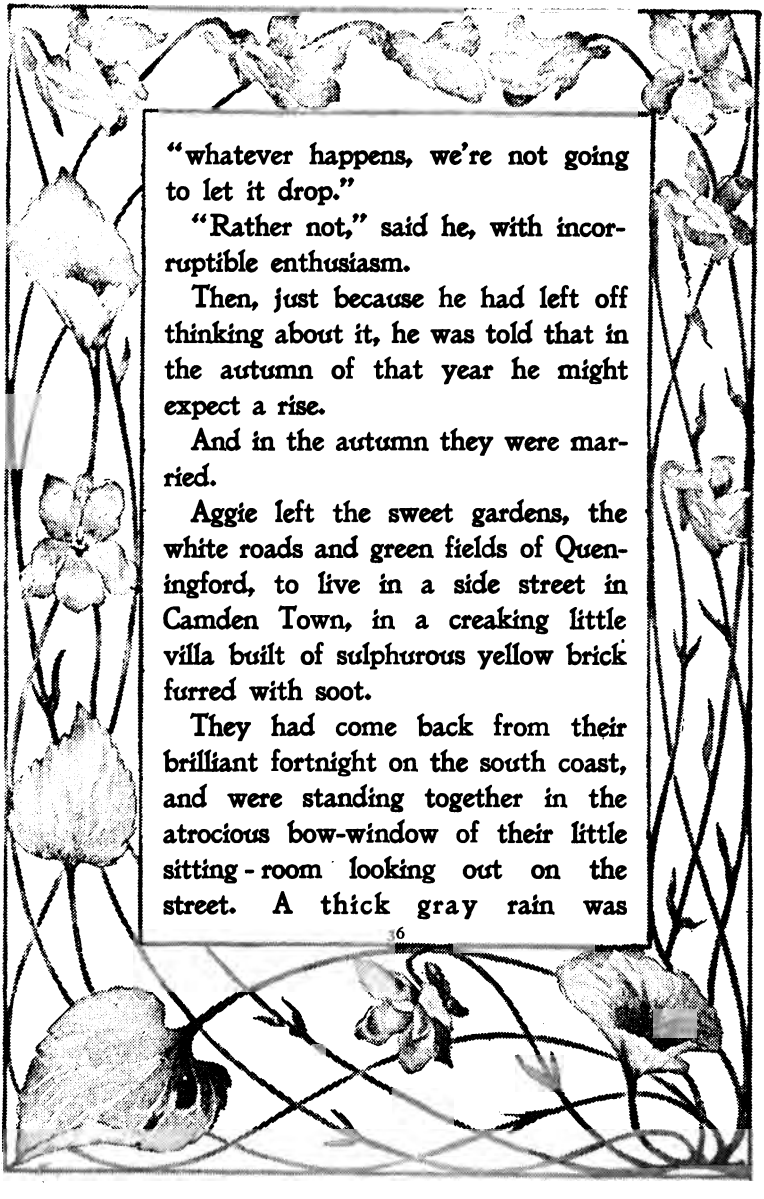
"I couldn't let you do it."

"Why ever not? We should see each other every evening, and every Saturday and Sunday. We should always be learning something new, and learning it together. We should have a heavenly time."

But Arthur shook his head sadly. "It wouldn't work, my sweetheart. We aren't made like that."

"I am," said Aggie, stoutly, and there was silence.

"Anyhow," she said, presently,



"whatever happens, we're not going to let it drop."

"Rather not," said he, with incorruptible enthusiasm.

Then, just because he had left off thinking about it, he was told that in the autumn of that year he might expect a rise.

And in the autumn they were married.

Aggie left the sweet gardens, the white roads and green fields of Queningford, to live in a side street in Camden Town, in a creaking little villa built of sulphurous yellow brick furred with soot.

They had come back from their brilliant fortnight on the south coast, and were standing together in the atrocious bow-window of their little sitting-room looking out on the street. A thick gray rain was

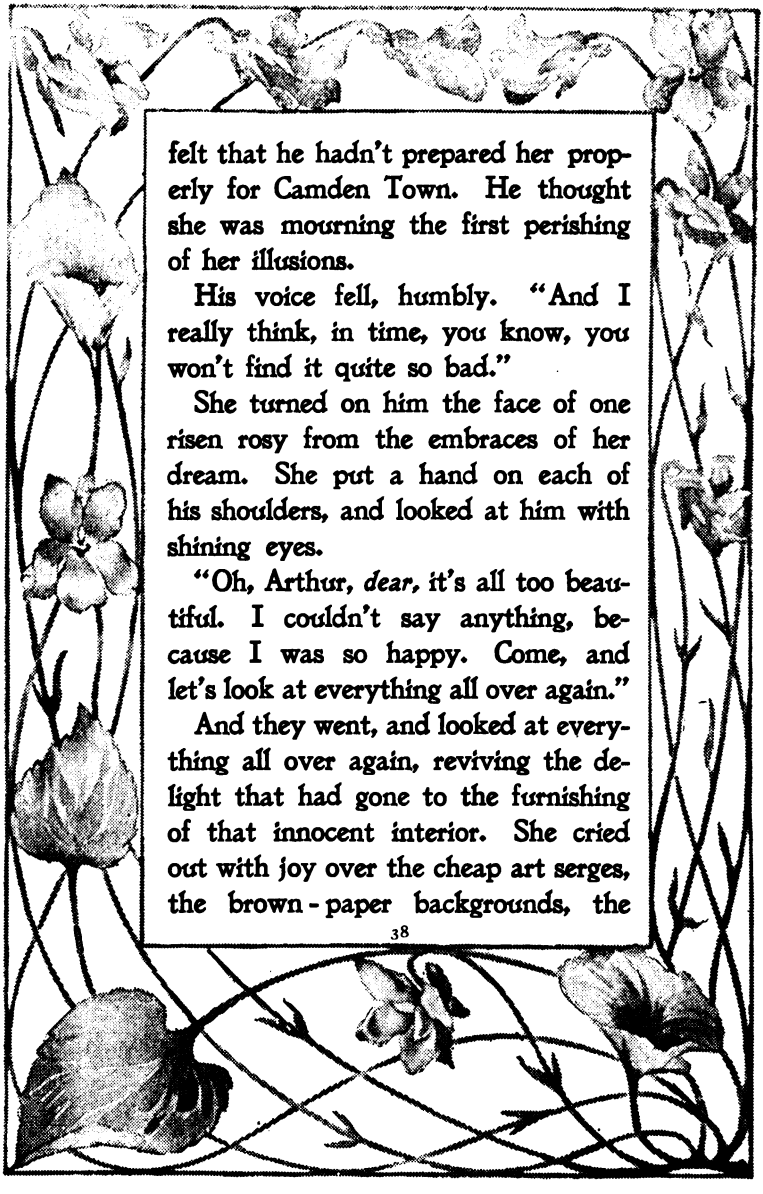
falling, and a dust-cart was in sight.

"Aggie," he said, "I'm afraid you'll miss the country."

She said nothing; she was lost in thought.

"It looks rather a brute of a place, doesn't it? But it won't be so bad when the rain clears off. And you know, dear, there are the museums and picture-galleries in town, and there'll be the concerts, and lectures on all sorts of interesting subjects, two or three times a week. Then there's our Debating Society at Hampstead—just a few of us who meet together to discuss big questions. Every month it meets, and you'll get to know all the intellectual people—"

Aggie nodded her head at each exciting item of the programme as he reeled it off. His heart smote him; he



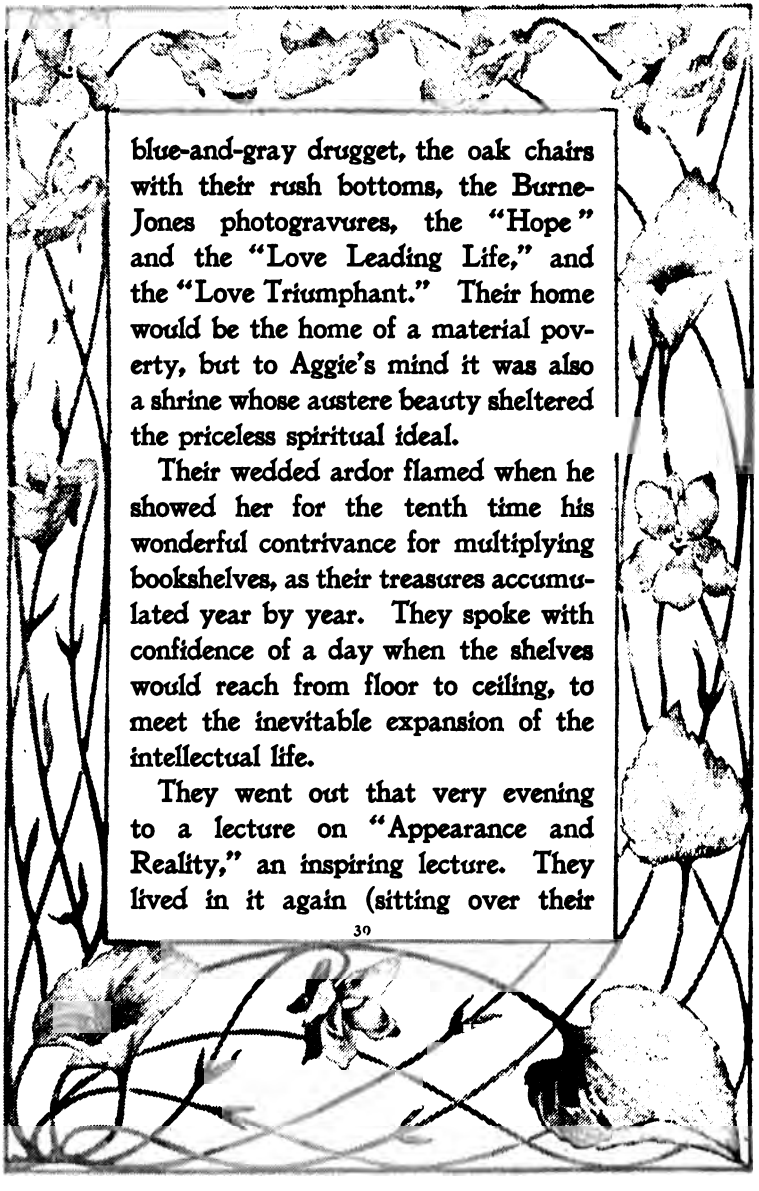
felt that he hadn't prepared her properly for Camden Town. He thought she was mourning the first perishing of her illusions.

His voice fell, humbly. "And I really think, in time, you know, you won't find it quite so bad."

She turned on him the face of one risen rosy from the embraces of her dream. She put a hand on each of his shoulders, and looked at him with shining eyes.

"Oh, Arthur, *dear*, it's all too beautiful. I couldn't say anything, because I was so happy. Come, and let's look at everything all over again."

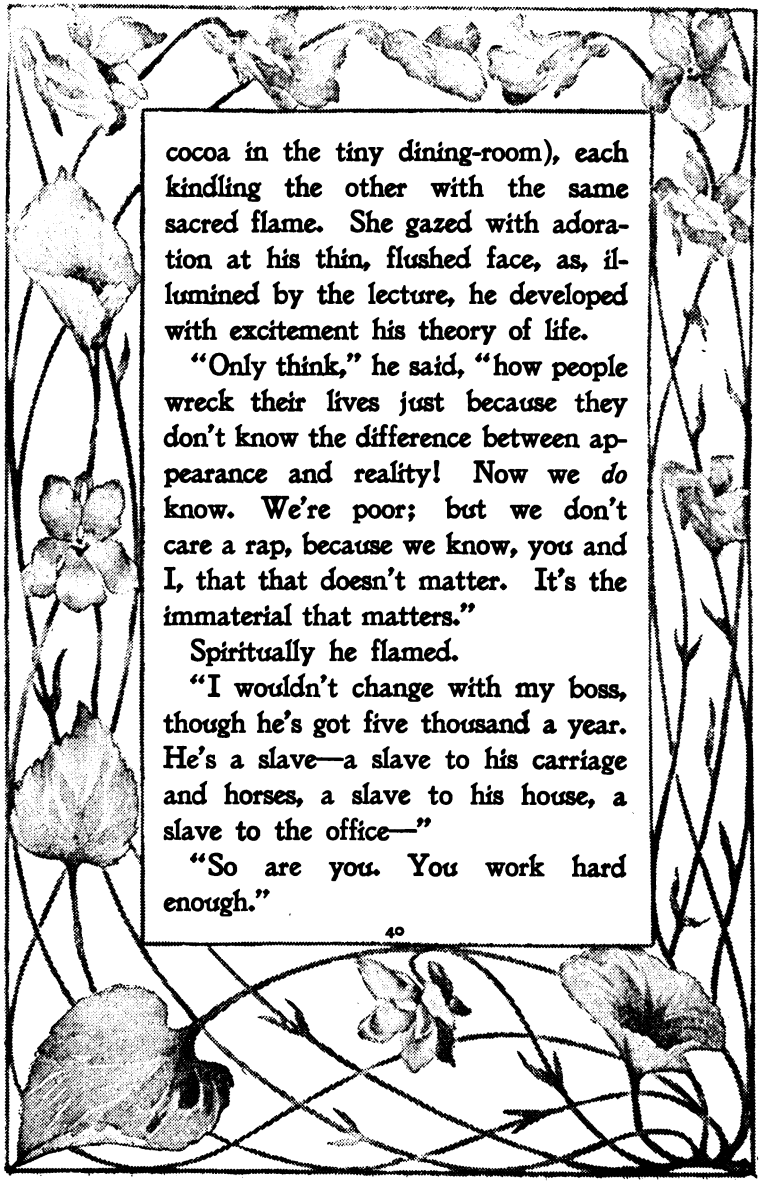
And they went, and looked at everything all over again, reviving the delight that had gone to the furnishing of that innocent interior. She cried out with joy over the cheap art serges, the brown-paper backgrounds, the



blue-and-gray drugget, the oak chairs with their rush bottoms, the Burne-Jones photogravures, the "Hope" and the "Love Leading Life," and the "Love Triumphant." Their home would be the home of a material poverty, but to Aggie's mind it was also a shrine whose austere beauty sheltered the priceless spiritual ideal.

Their wedded ardor flamed when he showed her for the tenth time his wonderful contrivance for multiplying bookshelves, as their treasures accumulated year by year. They spoke with confidence of a day when the shelves would reach from floor to ceiling, to meet the inevitable expansion of the intellectual life.

They went out that very evening to a lecture on "Appearance and Reality," an inspiring lecture. They lived in it again (sitting over their



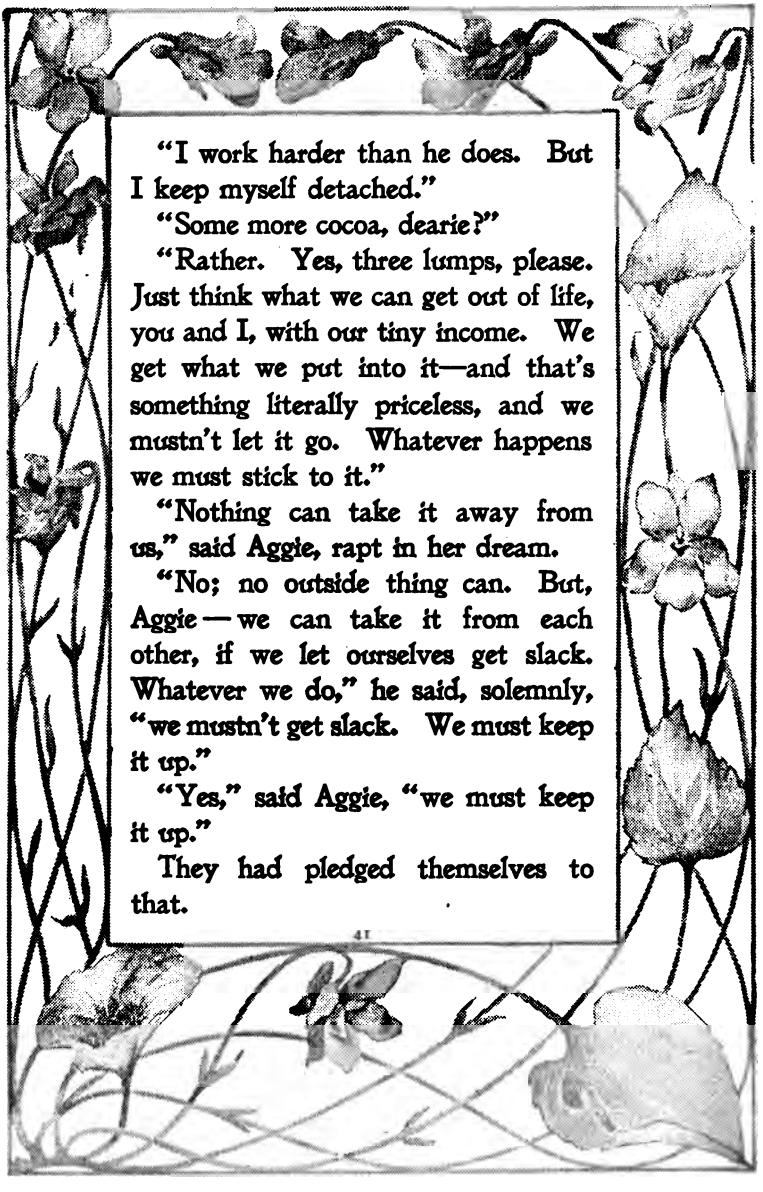
cocoa in the tiny dining-room), each kindling the other with the same sacred flame. She gazed with adoration at his thin, flushed face, as, illumined by the lecture, he developed with excitement his theory of life.

"Only think," he said, "how people wreck their lives just because they don't know the difference between appearance and reality! Now we *do* know. We're poor; but we don't care a rap, because we know, you and I, that that doesn't matter. It's the immaterial that matters."

Spiritually he flamed.

"I wouldn't change with my boss, though he's got five thousand a year. He's a slave—a slave to his carriage and horses, a slave to his house, a slave to the office—"

"So are you. You work hard enough."



"I work harder than he does. But I keep myself detached."

"Some more cocoa, dearie?"

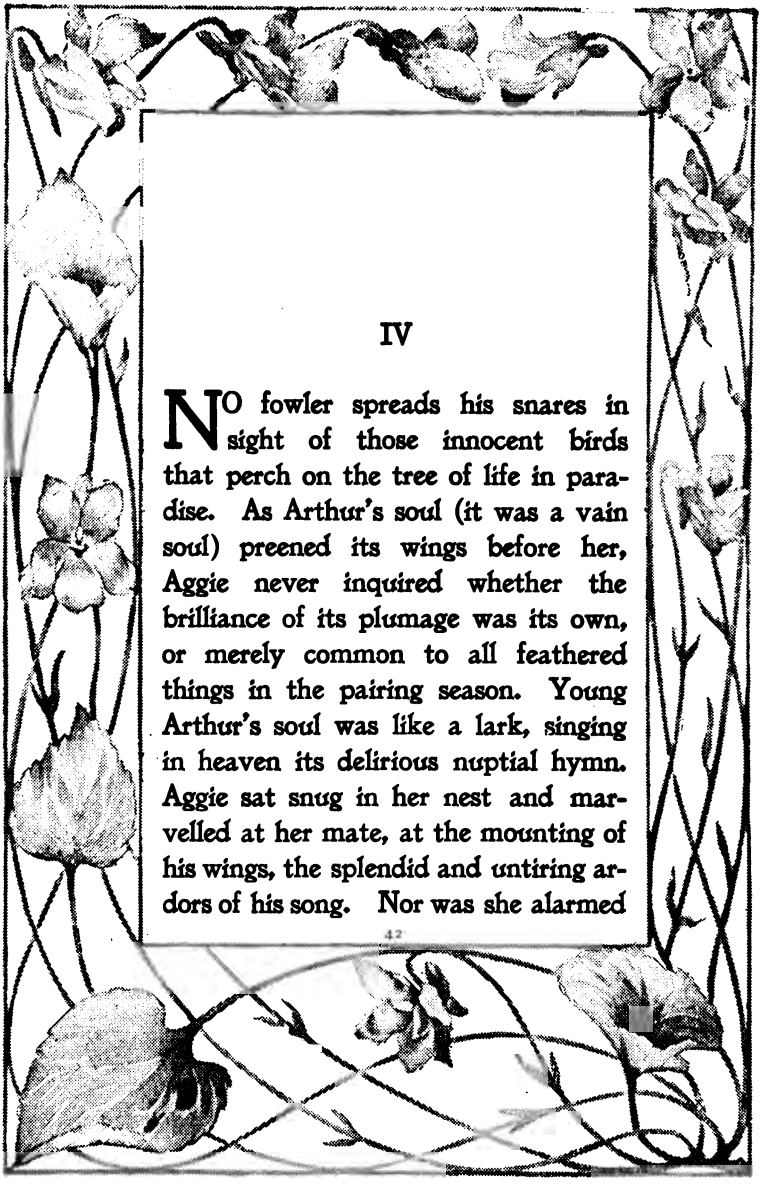
"Rather. Yes, three lumps, please. Just think what we can get out of life, you and I, with our tiny income. We get what we put into it—and that's something literally priceless, and we mustn't let it go. Whatever happens we must stick to it."

"Nothing can take it away from us," said Aggie, rapt in her dream.

"No; no outside thing can. But, Aggie — we can take it from each other, if we let ourselves get slack. Whatever we do," he said, solemnly, "we mustn't get slack. We must keep it up."

"Yes," said Aggie, "we must keep it up."

They had pledged themselves to that.

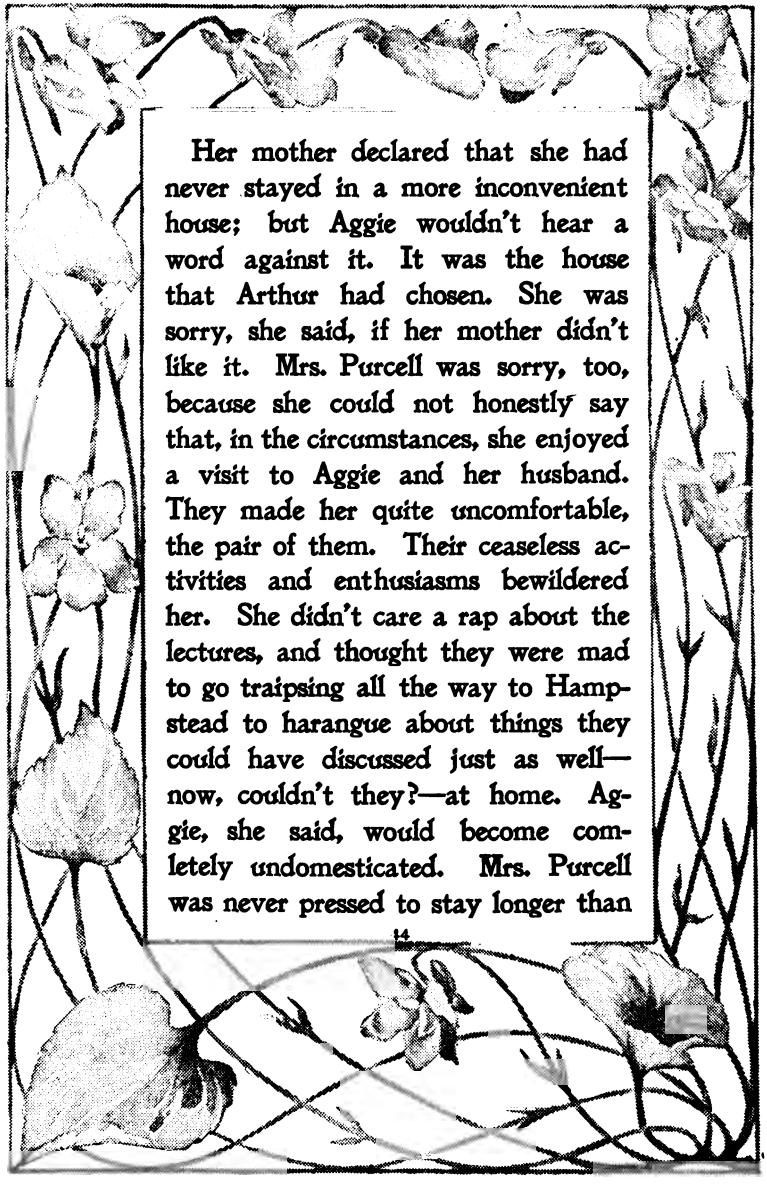


IV

NO fowler spreads his snares in sight of those innocent birds that perch on the tree of life in paradise. As Arthur's soul (it was a vain soul) preened its wings before her, Aggie never inquired whether the brilliance of its plumage was its own, or merely common to all feathered things in the pairing season. Young Arthur's soul was like a lark, singing in heaven its delirious nuptial hymn. Aggie sat snug in her nest and marvelled at her mate, at the mounting of his wings, the splendid and untiring ardors of his song. Nor was she alarmed

at his remarkable disappearance into the empyrean. Lost to sight he might be, but she could count on his swift, inevitable descent into the nest.

The nest itself was the most wonderful nest a bird ever sat in. The two were so enthusiastic over everything that they delighted even in that dreadful, creaking, yellow villa. Its very vices entertained them. When it creaked they sat still and looked at each other, waiting for it to do it again. No other house ever possessed such ungovernable and mysterious spontaneities of sound. It was sometimes, they said, as if the villa were alive. And when all the wood-work shrank, and the winter winds streamed through their sitting-room, Aggie said nothing but put sand-bags in the window and covered them with art serge.

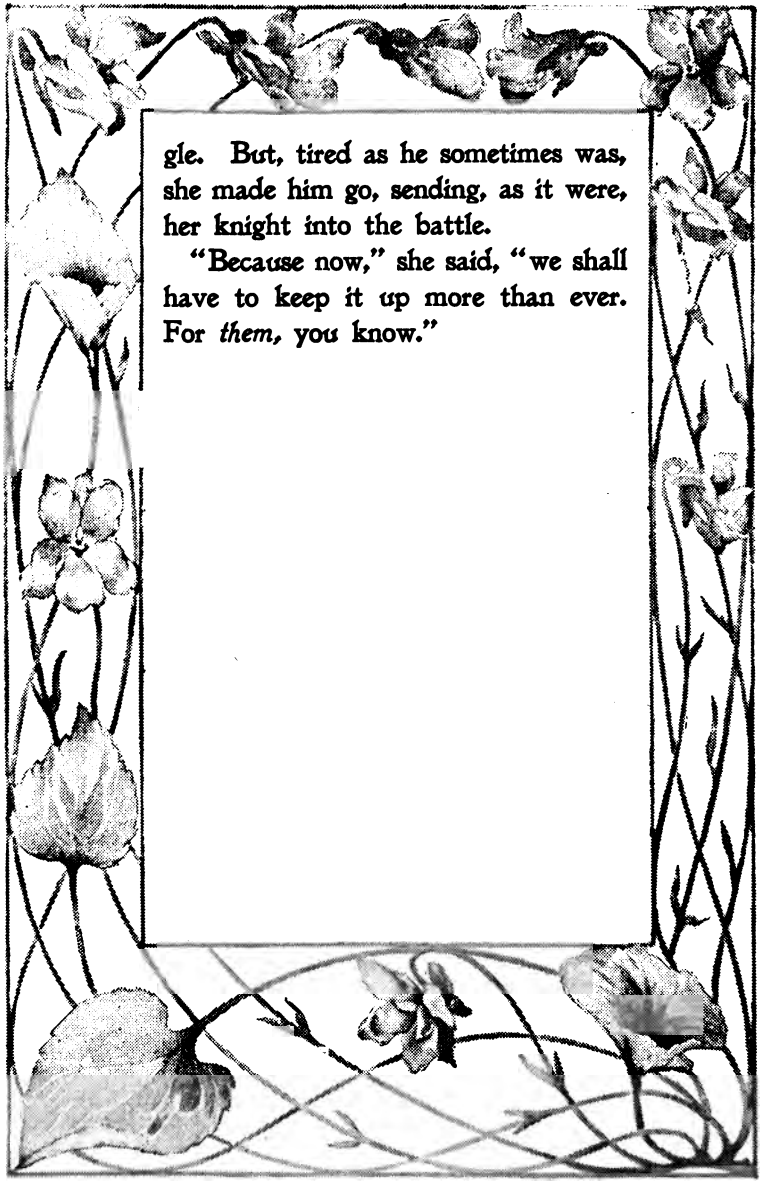


Her mother declared that she had never stayed in a more inconvenient house; but Aggie wouldn't hear a word against it. It was the house that Arthur had chosen. She was sorry, she said, if her mother didn't like it. Mrs. Purcell was sorry, too, because she could not honestly say that, in the circumstances, she enjoyed a visit to Aggie and her husband. They made her quite uncomfortable, the pair of them. Their ceaseless activities and enthusiasms bewildered her. She didn't care a rap about the lectures, and thought they were mad to go traipsing all the way to Hampstead to harangue about things they could have discussed just as well—now, couldn't they?—at home. Aggie, she said, would become completely undomesticated. Mrs. Purcell was never pressed to stay longer than

a week. They had no further need of her, those two sublime young egoists, fused by their fervors into one egoist, sublimer still. Mrs. Purcell was a sad hinderance to the intellectual life, and they were glad when she was gone.

Heavens, how they kept it up! All through the winter evenings, when they were not going to lectures, they were reading Browning aloud to each other. For pure love of it, for its own sake, they said. But did Aggie tire on that high way, she kept it up for Arthur's sake; did Arthur flag, he kept it up for hers.

Then, in the spring, there came a time when Aggie couldn't go to lectures any more. Arthur went, and brought her back the gist of them, lest she should feel herself utterly cut off. The intellectual life had, even for him, become something of a strug-



gle. But, tired as he sometimes was, she made him go, sending, as it were, her knight into the battle.

"Because now," she said, "we shall have to keep it up more than ever. For *them*, you know."

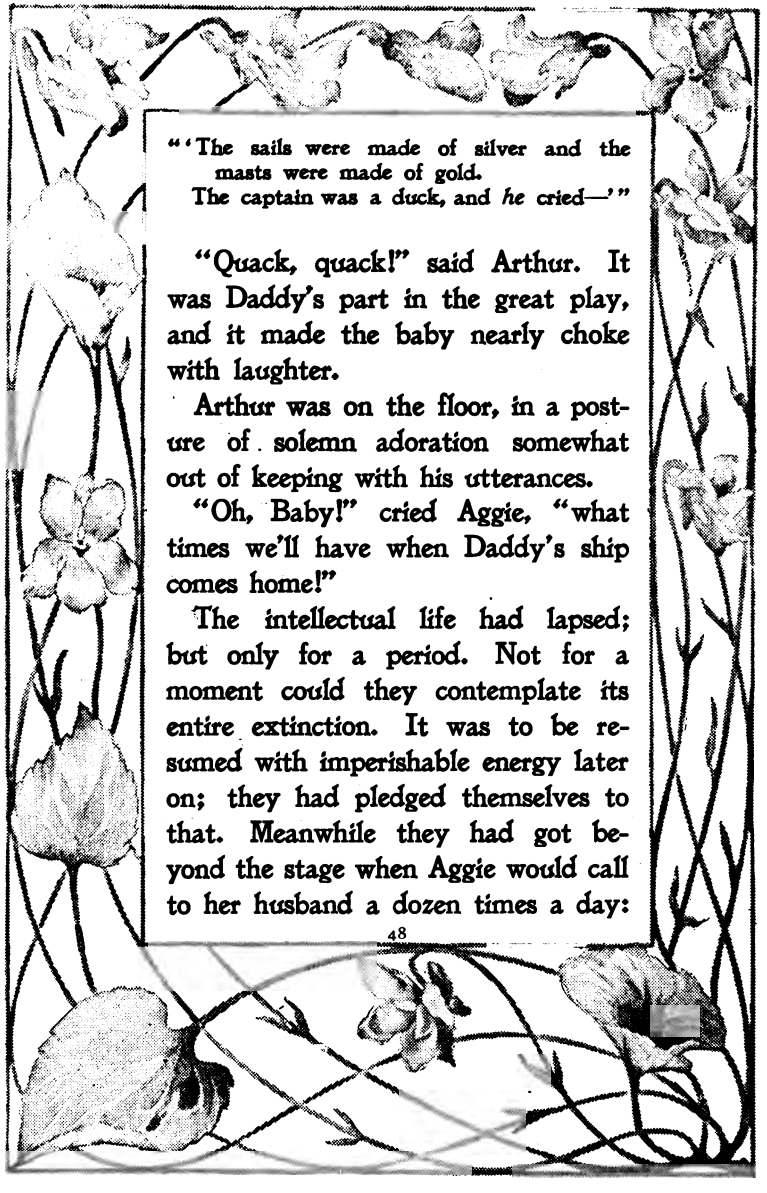
V

"'I saw a ship a-sailing, a-sailing on the sea,
And it was full of pretty things for Baby and for me.'"

AGGIE always sang that song the same way. When she sang "for Baby" she gave the baby a little squeeze that made him laugh; when she sang "for me" she gave Arthur a little look that made him smile.

"'There were raisins in the cabin, sugared kisses in the hold.'"

Here the baby was kissed crescendo, prestissimo, till he laughed more than ever.



"'The sails were made of silver and the masts were made of gold.
The captain was a duck, and *he* cried—'"

"Quack, quack!" said Arthur. It was Daddy's part in the great play, and it made the baby nearly choke with laughter.

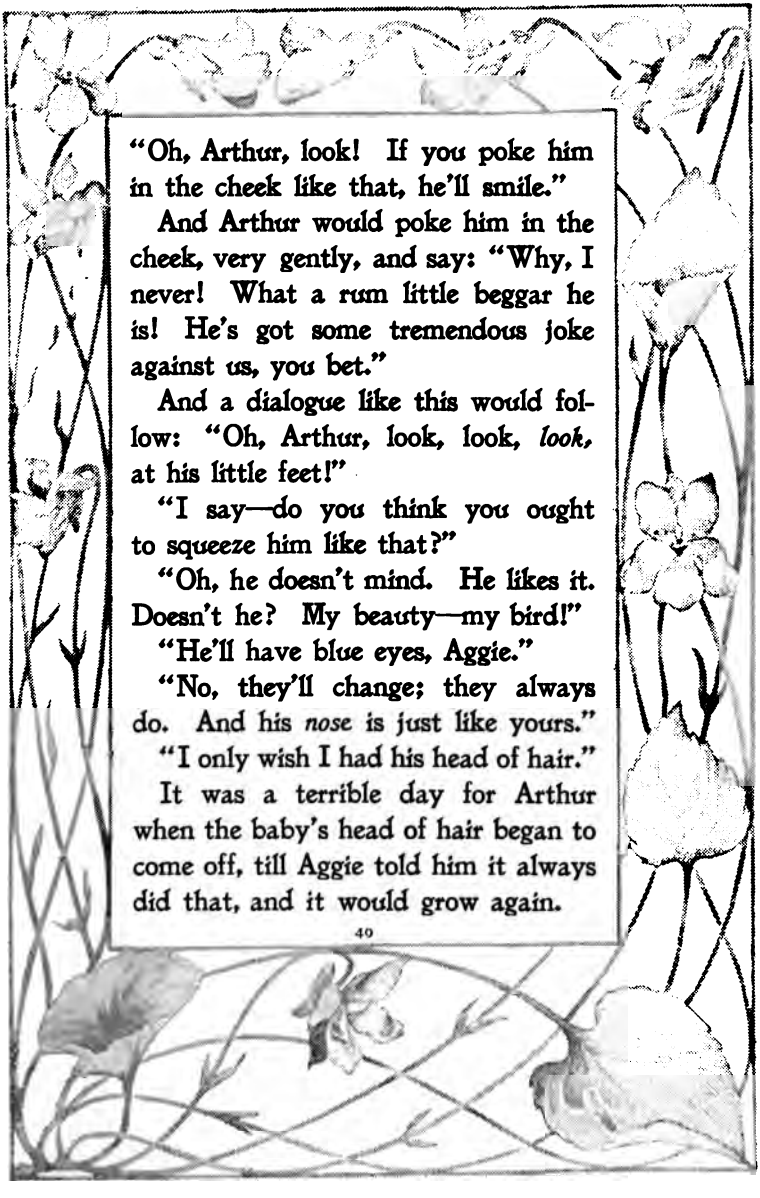
Arthur was on the floor, in a posture of solemn adoration somewhat out of keeping with his utterances.

"Oh, Baby!" cried Aggie, "what times we'll have when Daddy's ship comes home!"

The intellectual life had lapsed; but only for a period. Not for a moment could they contemplate its entire extinction. It was to be resumed with imperishable energy later on; they had pledged themselves to that. Meanwhile they had got beyond the stage when Aggie would call to her husband a dozen times a day:



"'Quack, quack!' said Arthur, and it made the baby nearly choke with laughter"



"Oh, Arthur, look! If you poke him in the cheek like that, he'll smile."

And Arthur would poke him in the cheek, very gently, and say: "Why, I never! What a rum little beggar he is! He's got some tremendous joke against us, you bet."

And a dialogue like this would follow: "Oh, Arthur, look, look, *look,* at his little feet!"

"I say—do you think you ought to squeeze him like that?"

"Oh, he doesn't mind. He likes it. Doesn't he? My beauty—my bird!"

"He'll have blue eyes, Aggie."

"No, they'll change; they always do. And his *nose* is just like yours."

"I only wish I had his head of hair."

It was a terrible day for Arthur when the baby's head of hair began to come off, till Aggie told him it always did that, and it would grow again.

To-day they were celebrating the first birthday of the little son. At supper that night a solemn thought came to Aggie.

"Oh, Arthur, only think. On Arty's birthday" (they had been practising calling him "Arty" for the last fortnight) "he won't be a baby any more."

"Never mind; Arty's little sister will be having her first birthday very soon after."

Aggie blushed for pure joy, and smiled. She hadn't thought of that. But how sad it would be for poor baby not to be *the* baby any more!

Arthur gave an anxious glance at Aggie in her evening blouse. His mind was not set so high but what he liked to see his pretty wife wearing pretty gowns. And some of the money that was to have gone to the buying

of books had passed over to the gay drapers of Camden Town and Holloway.

"You know what it means, dear? We shall have to live more carefully."

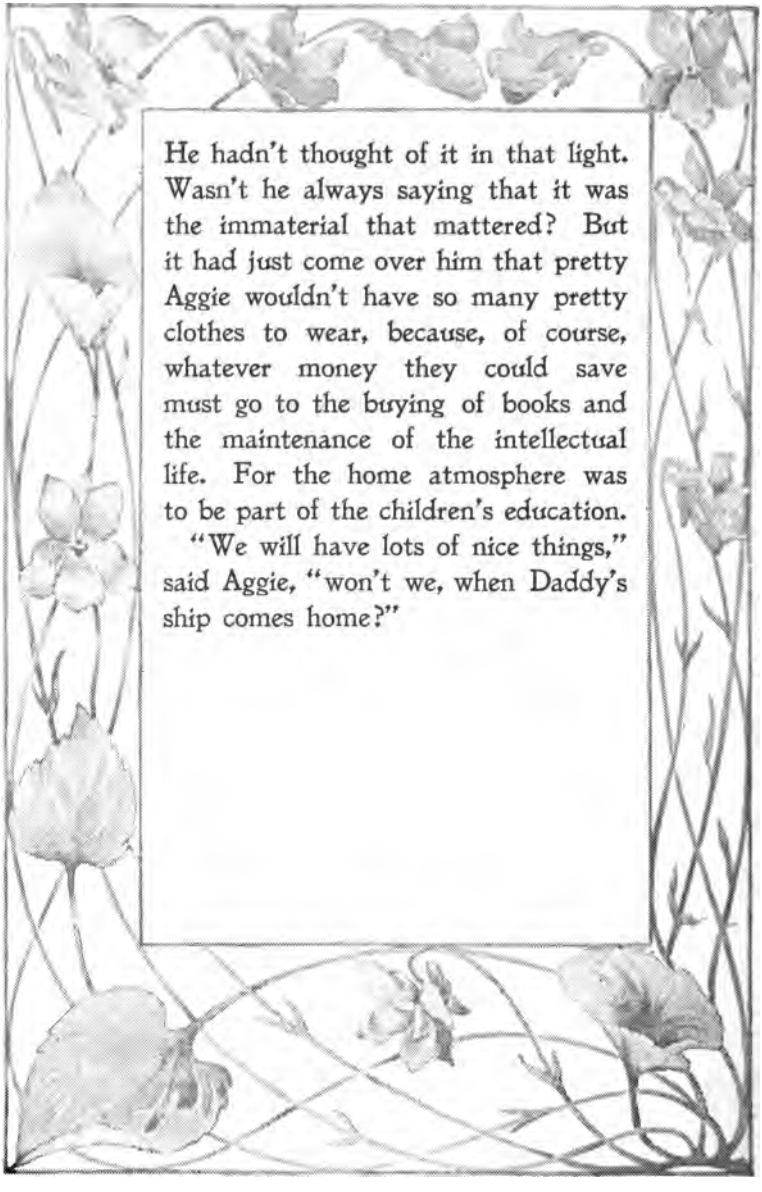
"Oh yes, of course I know that."

"Do you mind?"

"Mind?" She didn't know what he was talking about, but she gave a sad, foreboding glance at the well-appointed supper-table, where coffee and mutton-chops had succeeded cocoa. For Arthur had had a rise of salary that year; and if Aggie had a weakness, it was that she loved to get him plenty of nice, nourishing things to eat.

"We sha'n't be able to have quite so many nice things for supper. Shall *you* mind?"

"Of course I sha'n't. Do you take me for a pig?" said Arthur, gayly.



He hadn't thought of it in that light. Wasn't he always saying that it was the immaterial that mattered? But it had just come over him that pretty Aggie wouldn't have so many pretty clothes to wear, because, of course, whatever money they could save must go to the buying of books and the maintenance of the intellectual life. For the home atmosphere was to be part of the children's education.

"We will have lots of nice things," said Aggie, "won't we, when Daddy's ship comes home?"

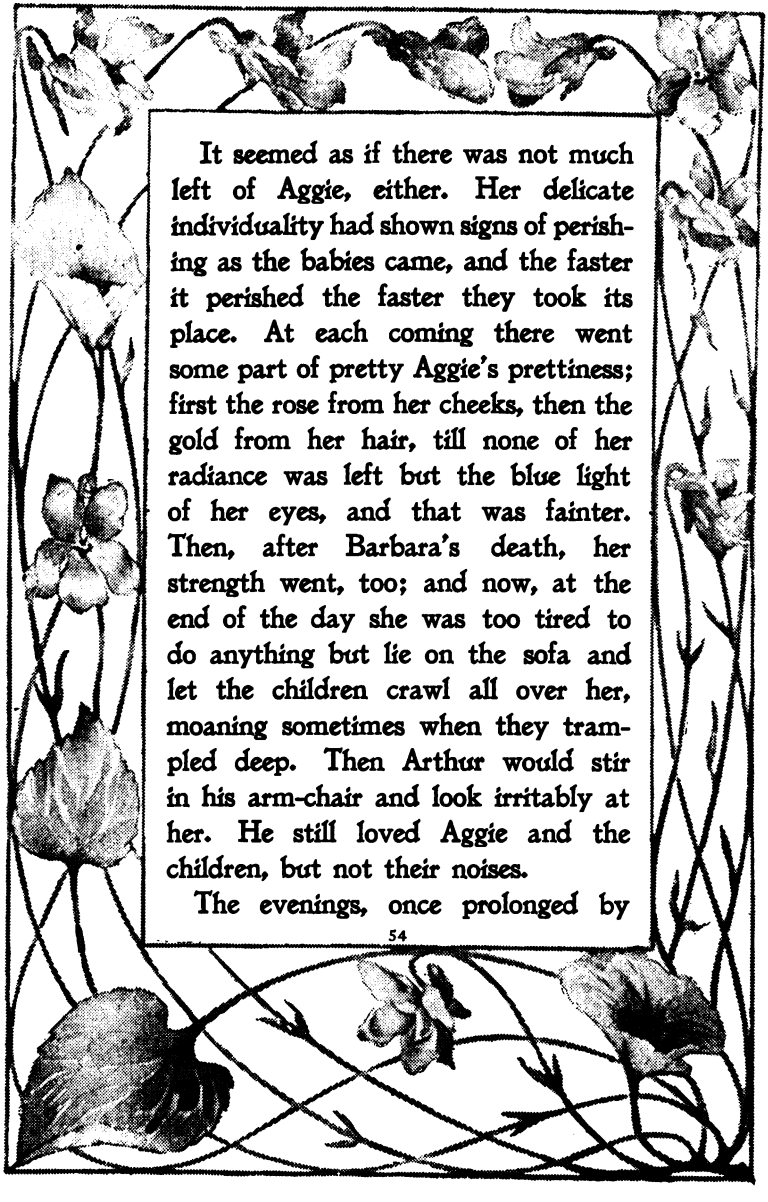
VI

DADDY'S ship never did come home.

"Quack, quack!" said Aggie, and three shrill voices echoed her.

Aggie had to be the duck herself now; for Daddy had long ago given up his part in the spirited drama.

They had been married six years, and Aggie had had six children. There was Arty and Catty and Willie and Dick and Emmy (the baby of the year); and a memory like a sword in her mother's heart, which was all that was left of little Barbara, who had come after Catty.



It seemed as if there was not much left of Aggie, either. Her delicate individuality had shown signs of perishing as the babies came, and the faster it perished the faster they took its place. At each coming there went some part of pretty Aggie's prettiness; first the rose from her cheeks, then the gold from her hair, till none of her radiance was left but the blue light of her eyes, and that was fainter. Then, after Barbara's death, her strength went, too; and now, at the end of the day she was too tired to do anything but lie on the sofa and let the children crawl all over her, moaning sometimes when they trampled deep. Then Arthur would stir in his arm-chair and look irritably at her. He still loved Aggie and the children, but not their noises.

The evenings, once prolonged by

gas-light and enthusiasm to a glorious life, had shrunk to a two hours' sitting after supper. They never went anywhere now. Picture-galleries and concert-halls knew them no more. The Debating Society at Hampstead had long ago missed the faithful, inseparable pair—the pair who never spoke, who sat in the background listening with shy, earnest faces, with innocence that yearned, wide-eyed, after wisdom, while it followed, with passionate subservience, the inane. Arthur had proved himself powerless to keep it up. If an archangel's trump had announced a lecture for that evening, it would not have roused him from his apathy.

And as they never went to see anybody, nobody ever came to see them. The Hampstead ladies found Aggie dull and her conversation monoto-

nous. It was all about Arthur and the babies; and those ladies cared little for Arthur, and for the babies less. Of Aggie's past enthusiasm they said that it was nothing but a pose. Time had revealed her, the sunken soul of patience and of pathos, the beast of burden, the sad-eyed, slow, and gray.

The spirit of the place, too, had departed, leaving a decomposing and discolored shell. The beloved yellow villa had disclosed the worst side of its nature. The brown wall-paper had peeled and blistered, like an unwholesome skin. The art serge had faded; the drugget was dropping to pieces, worn with many feet; the wood-work had shrunk more than ever, and draughts, keen as knives, cut through the rooms and passages. The "Hope" and the "Love Leading Life" and the "Love Triumphant,"

like imperishable frescos in a decaying sanctuary, were pitiful survivals, testifying to the death of dreams.

Saddest of all, the bookshelves, that were to have shot up to the ceiling, had remained three feet from the floor, showing the abrupt arrest of the intellectual life.

It was evident that they hadn't kept it up.

If anything, Arthur was more effaced, more obliterated, than his wife. He, whose appearance had once suggested a remarkable personality, a poet or a thinker, now looked what he had become, a depressed and harassed city clerk, no more. His face was dragged by deep downward lines that accentuated its weakness. A thin wisp of colorless mustache sheltered, without concealing, the irritability of his mouth. Under his high, sallow

forehead, his eyes, once so spiritual, looked out on his surroundings with more indifference than discontent. His soul fretted him no longer; it had passed beyond strenuousness to the peace of dulness. Only the sounds made by his wife and children had power to agitate him.

He was agitated now.

"That will do," he said, looking up from the magazine he was trying to read, not because it interested him in the least, but because it helped to keep the noises out.

But the children were clamoring for an encore. "Again, again!" they cried. "Oh Mummy, *do* do it again!"

"Hsh - sh - sh. Daddy's reading." And Aggie drew the children closer to her, and went on with the rhyme in her sad, weak whisper.

"If you must read aloud to them,

for goodness' sake speak up and have done with it. I can't stand that whispering."

Aggie put down the picture-book, and Arty seized one half and Catty the other, and they tugged, till Catty let go and hit Arty, and Arty hit Catty back again, and Catty howled.

"Can't you keep those children quiet?"

"Oh, Arty, shame! to hurt your little sister!"

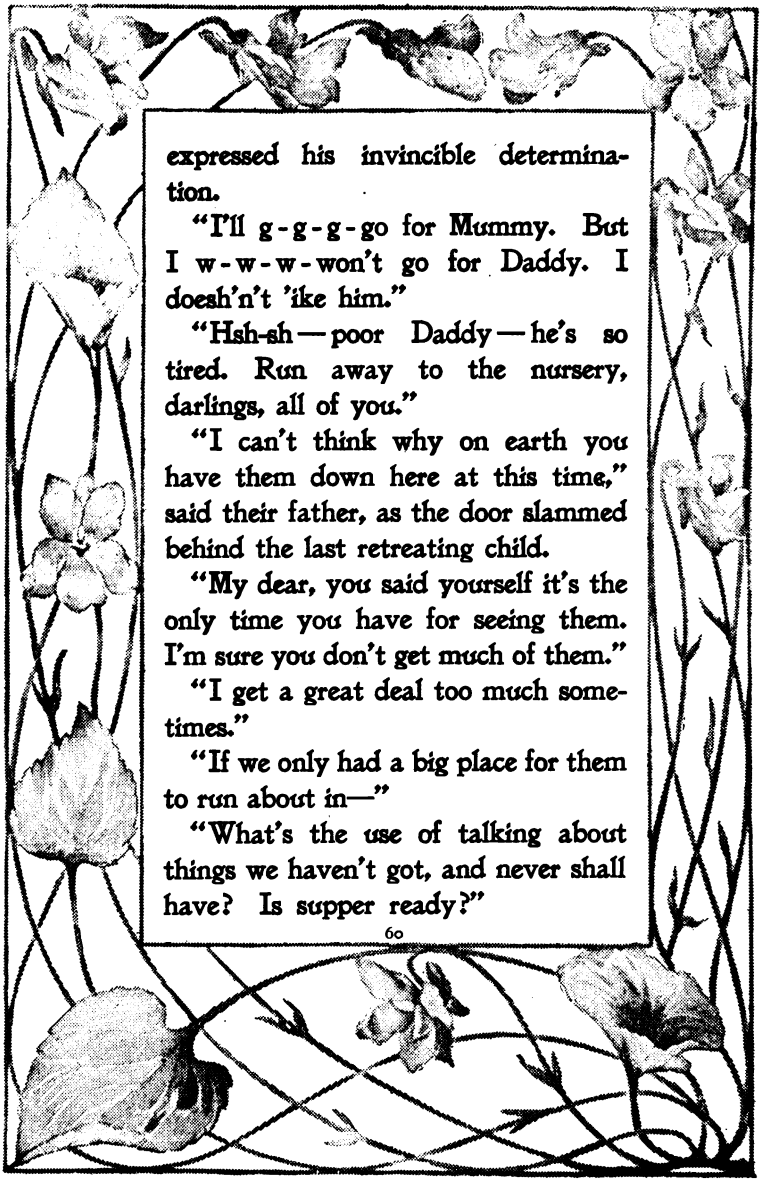
At that Arty howled louder than Catty.

Arthur sat up in his chair.

"Leave the room, sir! Clear out this instant!" His weak face looked weaker in its inappropriate assumption of command.

"Do you hear what I say, sir?"

Arty stopped crying, and steadied his quivering infant mouth till it



expressed his invincible determination.

"I'll g-g-g-go for Mummy. But I w-w-w-won't go for Daddy. I doesn't 'ike him."

"Hsh-sh — poor Daddy — he's so tired. Run away to the nursery, darlings, all of you."

"I can't think why on earth you have them down here at this time," said their father, as the door slammed behind the last retreating child.

"My dear, you said yourself it's the only time you have for seeing them. I'm sure you don't get much of them."

"I get a great deal too much sometimes."

"If we only had a big place for them to run about in—"

"What's the use of talking about things we haven't got, and never shall have? Is supper ready?"

She raised herself heavily from her sofa, and went to see, trailing an old shawl after her. Arthur, by way of being useful, put his foot upon the shawl as it went by.

After supper he felt decidedly better, and was inclined to talk.

"I met Davidson this morning in the city. He said his wife hadn't seen you for an age. Why don't you go and look her up?"

Aggie was silent.

"You can't expect her to be always running after you."

"I can't run after her, I assure you. I haven't the strength."

"You used," he said, reproachfully, "to be strong enough."

Aggie's mouth twisted into a blanched, unhappy smile — a smile born of wisdom and of patience and of pain.

"My dear, you don't know what it is to have had six children."

"Oh, don't I? I know enough not to want any more of them."

"Well—then—" said Aggie.

But Arthur's eyes evaded her imploring and pathetic gaze. He turned the subject back to Mrs. Davidson—a clumsy shift.

"Anyhow, it doesn't take much strength to call on Mrs. Davidson, does it?"

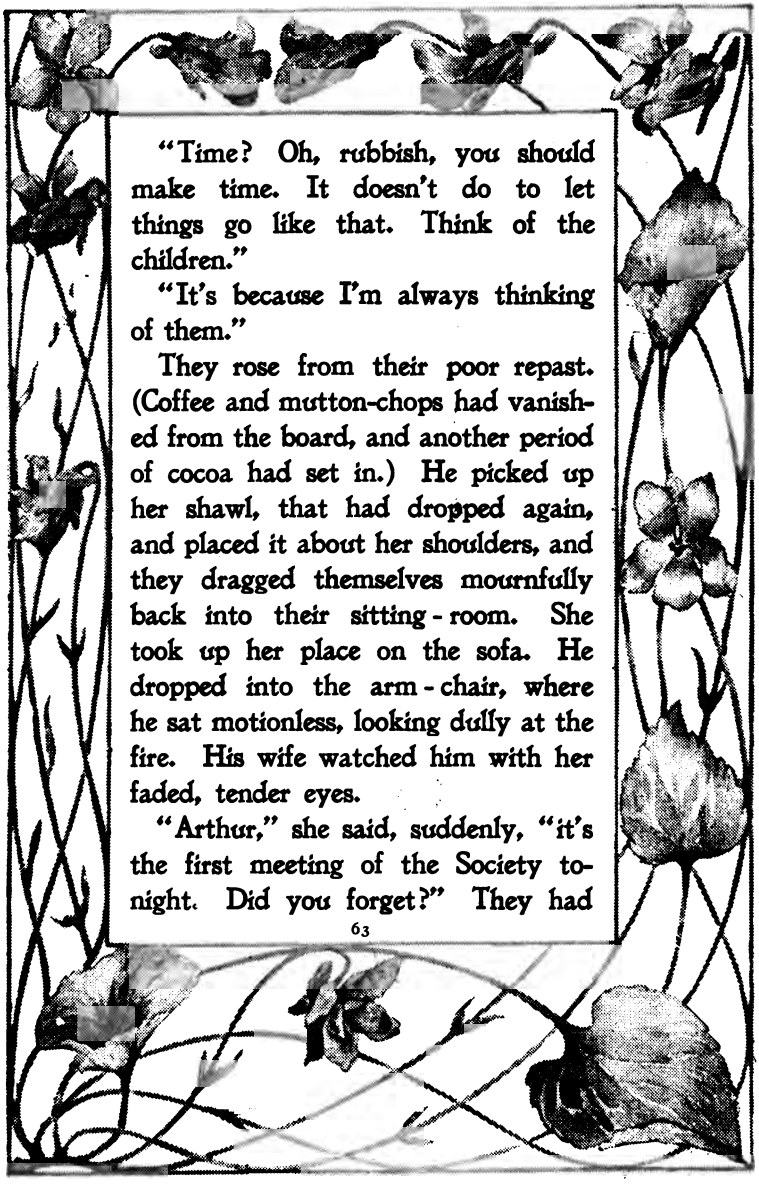
"It's no good. I can't think of anything to say to her."

"Oh, come, she isn't difficult to get on with."

"No, but I am. I don't know why it is I always feel so stupid now."

"That," said Arthur, "is because you haven't kept it up."

"I haven't had the time," she wailed.



"Time? Oh, rubbish, you should make time. It doesn't do to let things go like that. Think of the children."

"It's because I'm always thinking of them."

They rose from their poor repast. (Coffee and mutton-chops had vanished from the board, and another period of cocoa had set in.) He picked up her shawl, that had dropped again, and placed it about her shoulders, and they dragged themselves mournfully back into their sitting-room. She took up her place on the sofa. He dropped into the arm-chair, where he sat motionless, looking dully at the fire. His wife watched him with her faded, tender eyes.

"Arthur," she said, suddenly, "it's the first meeting of the Society to-night. Did you forget?" They had

never admitted, to themselves or to each other, that they had given it up.

"Yes," said Arthur, peevishly, "of course I forgot. How on earth did you expect me to remember?"

"I think you ought to go, dear, sometimes. You never went all last winter."

"I know."

"Isn't it a pity not to try—a little—just to keep it up? If it's only for the children's sake."

"My dear Aggie, it's for the children's sake—and yours—that I fag my brain out, as it is. When you've been as hard at it as I've been, all day, you don't feel so very like turning out again—not for that sort of intellectual game. You say you feel stupid in the afternoon. What do you suppose I feel like in the evening?"

His accents cut Aggie to the heart.

"Oh, my dear, I know. I only thought it might do you good, sometimes, to get a change—if it's only from me and my stupidity."

"If there's one thing I hate more than another," said Arthur, "it is a change."

She knew it. That had been her consolation. Arthur was not as the race of dreamers to which he once seemed to have belonged. There was in him a dumb, undying fidelity to the tried and chosen. From the first, before his apathy came on him, he had hardly ever left her to an evening by herself. He had had neither eyes nor ears nor voice for any other woman. And though her face had become the face of another woman, and he hated changes, she knew that it had never changed for him. He loved her more

than any of the six children she had borne him.

"After all," said Aggie, "do you think it really matters?"

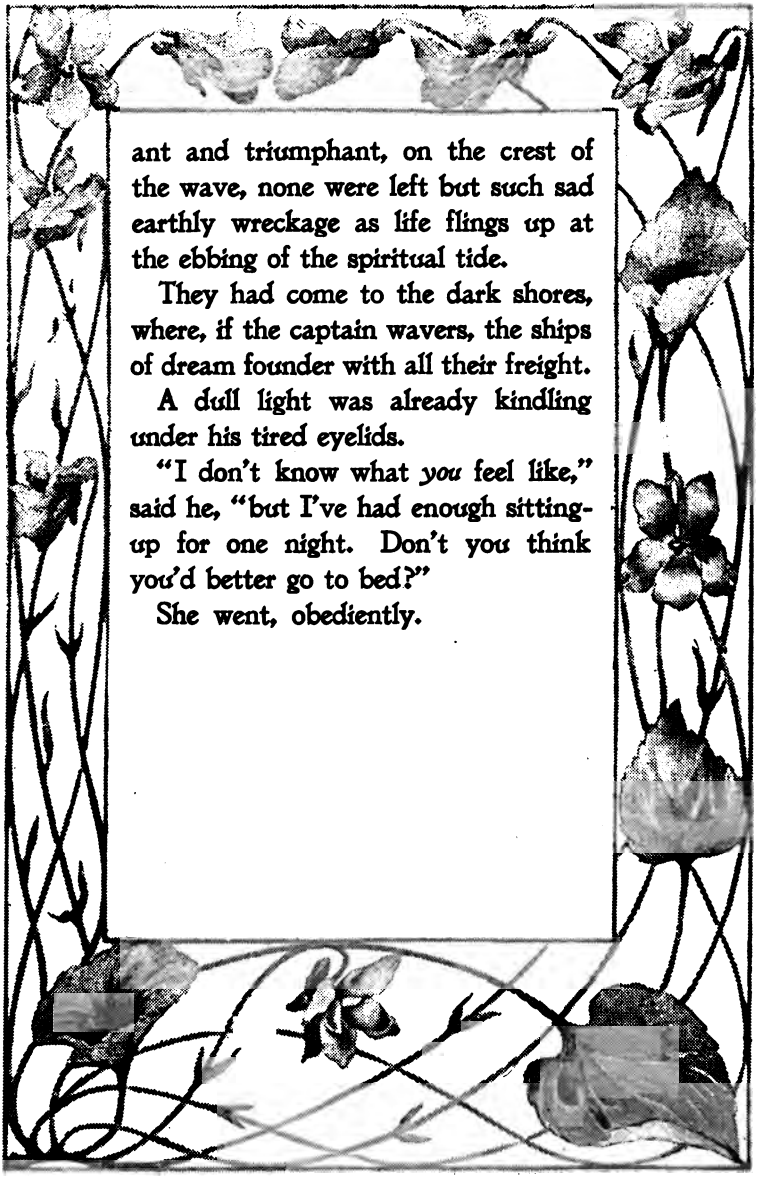
"Do I think what matters?"

"What we've lost."

He looked suspiciously at her, his heavy brain stirred by some foreboding of uncomfortable suggestion; she had been thinking of Barbara, perhaps.

"I don't know what you mean."

He didn't. The flame in the woman's heart was not wholly dead, because he had kindled it, and it was one with her love of him. The dream they had dreamed together had lived on for her; first, as an agony, then as a regret. But the man had passed over into the sensual darkness that is seldom pierced by pain. Of the pleasures that had once borne him, buoy-



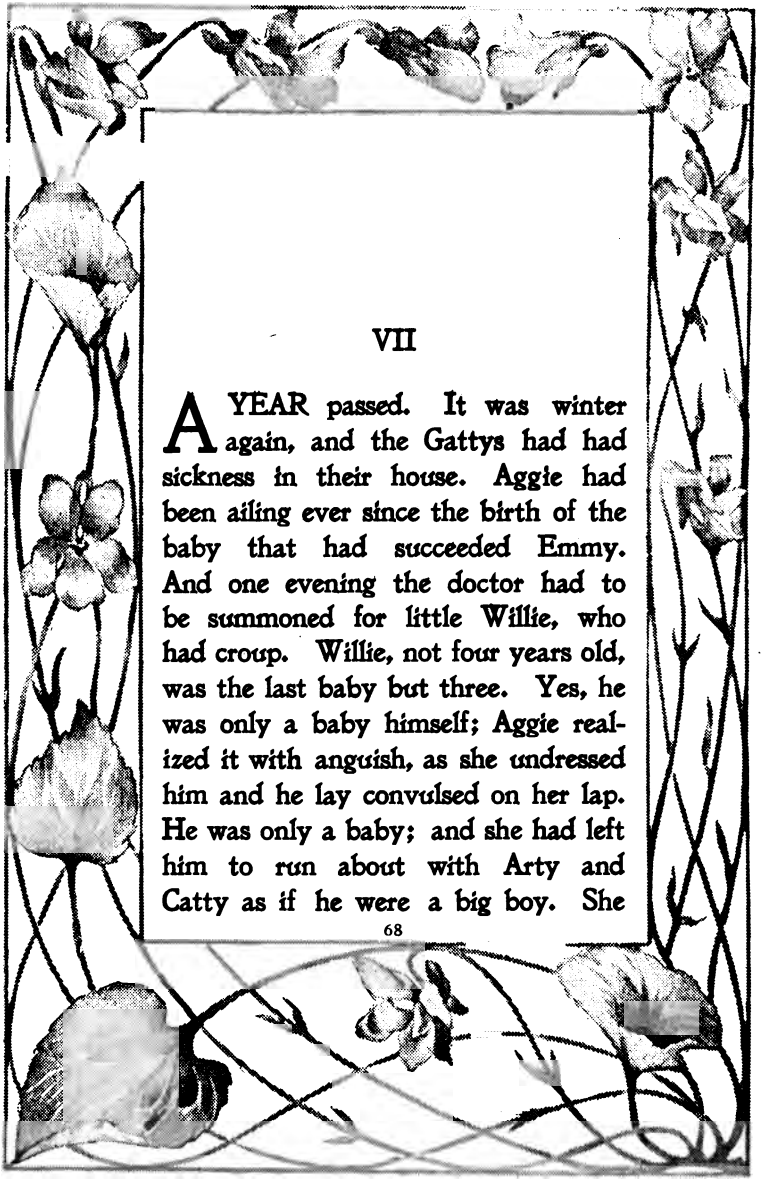
ant and triumphant, on the crest of the wave, none were left but such sad earthly wreckage as life flings up at the ebbing of the spiritual tide.

They had come to the dark shores, where, if the captain wavers, the ships of dream founder with all their freight.

A dull light was already kindling under his tired eyelids.

"I don't know what *you* feel like," said he, "but I've had enough sitting-up for one night. Don't you think you'd better go to bed?"

She went, obediently.



VII

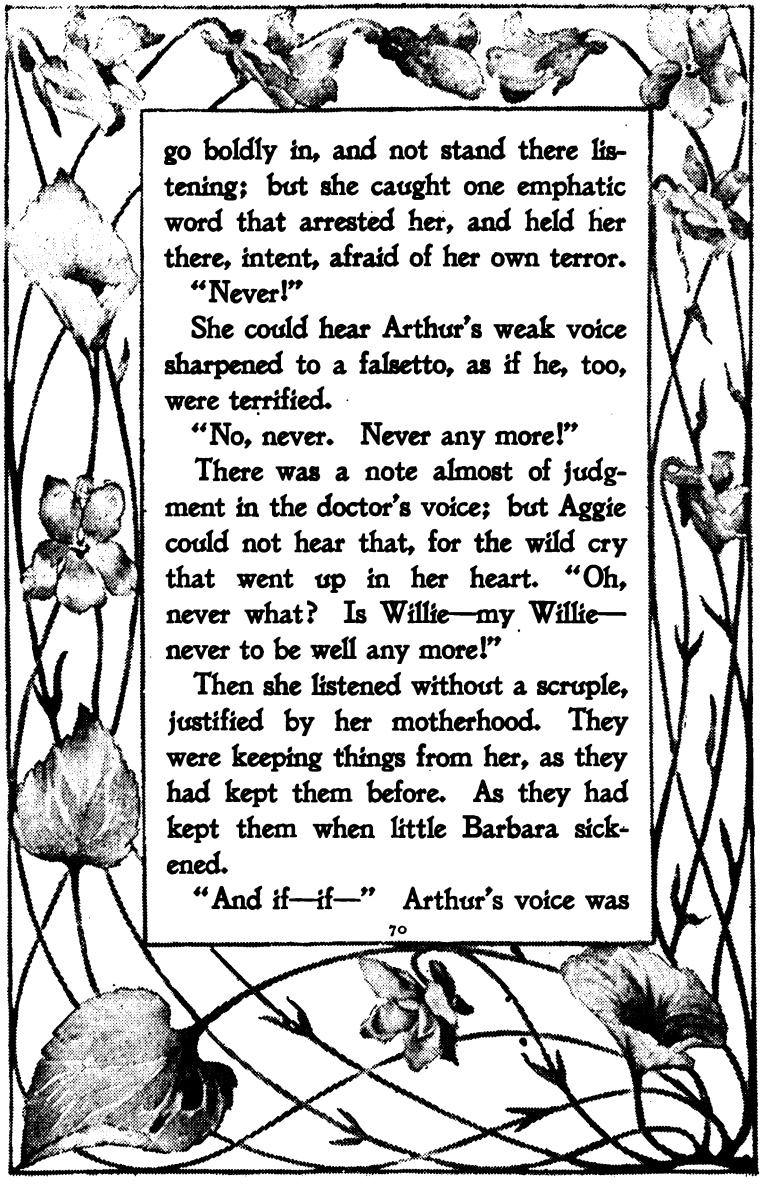
A YEAR passed. It was winter again, and the Gattys had had sickness in their house. Aggie had been ailing ever since the birth of the baby that had succeeded Emmy. And one evening the doctor had to be summoned for little Willie, who had croup. Willie, not four years old, was the last baby but three. Yes, he was only a baby himself; Aggie realized it with anguish, as she undressed him and he lay convulsed on her lap. He was only a baby; and she had left him to run about with Arty and Catty as if he were a big boy. She

should have taken more care of Willie.

But the gods took care of Willie, and he was better before the doctor could arrive; and Aggie got all the credit of his cure.

Aggie couldn't believe it. She was convinced the doctor was keeping something from her, he sat so long with Arthur in the dining-room. She could hear their voices booming up the chimney as she mended the fire in the nursery overhead. It was not, she argued, as if he ever cared to talk to Arthur. Nobody ever cared to talk to Arthur long, nor did he care to talk to anybody.

So, when the clock struck seven (the doctor's dinner-hour), and the dining-room door never opened, Aggie's anxiety became terror, and she stole down-stairs. She had meant to



go boldly in, and not stand there listening; but she caught one emphatic word that arrested her, and held her there, intent, afraid of her own terror.

"Never!"

She could hear Arthur's weak voice sharpened to a falsetto, as if he, too, were terrified.

"No, never. Never any more!"

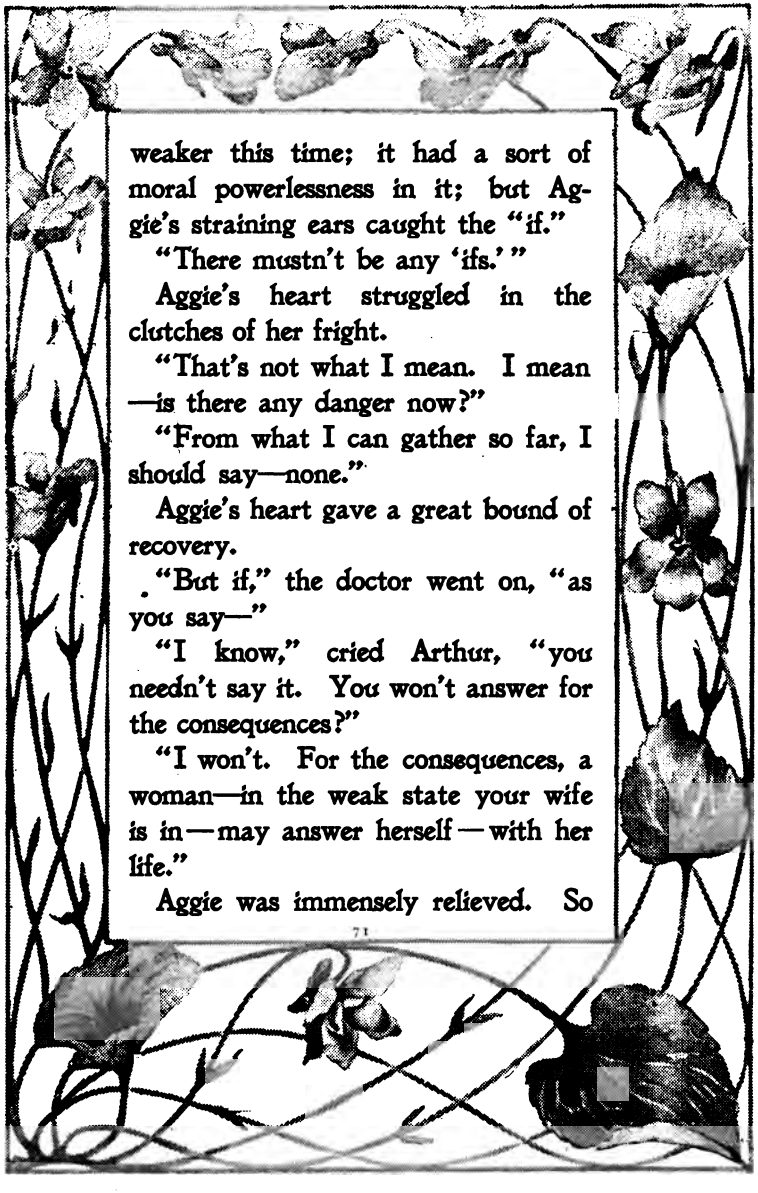
There was a note almost of judgment in the doctor's voice; but Aggie could not hear that, for the wild cry that went up in her heart. "Oh, never what? Is Willie—my Willie—never to be well any more!"

Then she listened without a scruple, justified by her motherhood. They were keeping things from her, as they had kept them before. As they had kept them when little Barbara sickened.

"And if—if—" Arthur's voice was



"She listened without a scruple, justified by her motherhood"



weaker this time; it had a sort of moral powerlessness in it; but Aggie's straining ears caught the "if."

"There mustn't be any 'ifs.'"

Aggie's heart struggled in the clutches of her fright.

"That's not what I mean. I mean —is there any danger now?"

"From what I can gather so far, I should say—none."

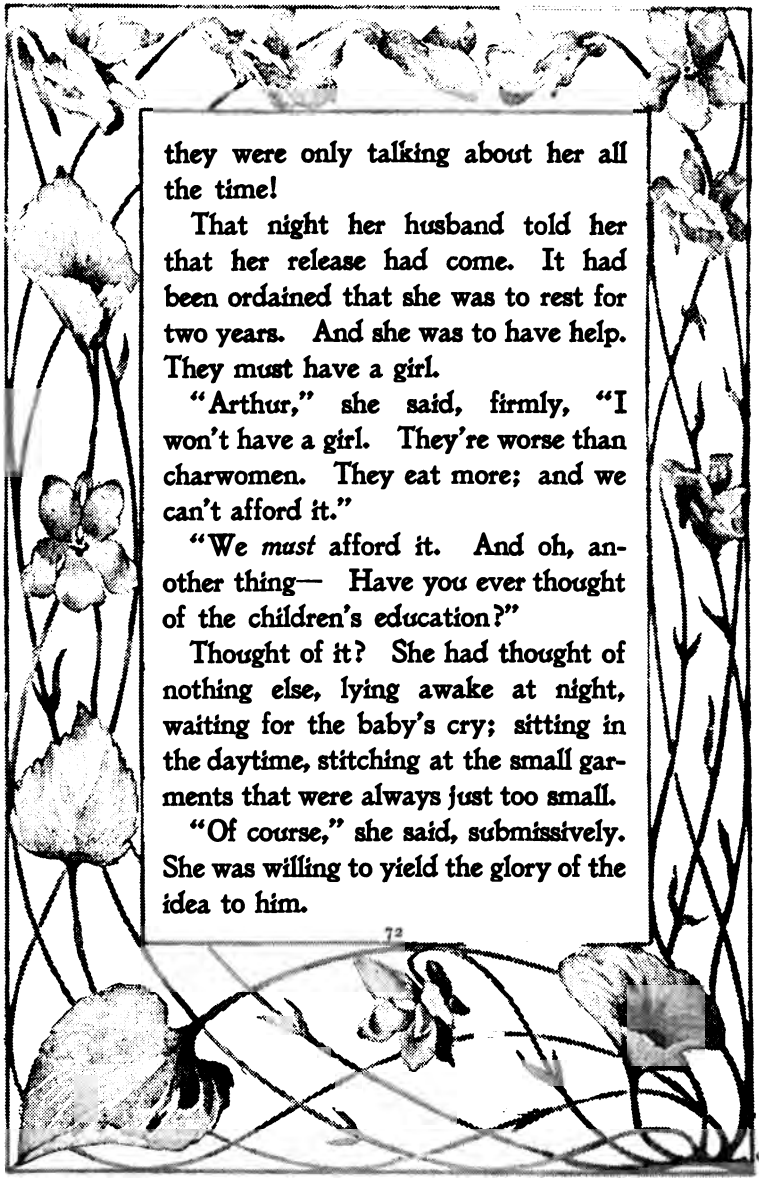
Aggie's heart gave a great bound of recovery.

"But if," the doctor went on, "as you say—"

"I know," cried Arthur, "you needn't say it. You won't answer for the consequences?"

"I won't. For the consequences, a woman—in the weak state your wife is in—may answer herself—with her life."

Aggie was immensely relieved. So



they were only talking about her all the time!

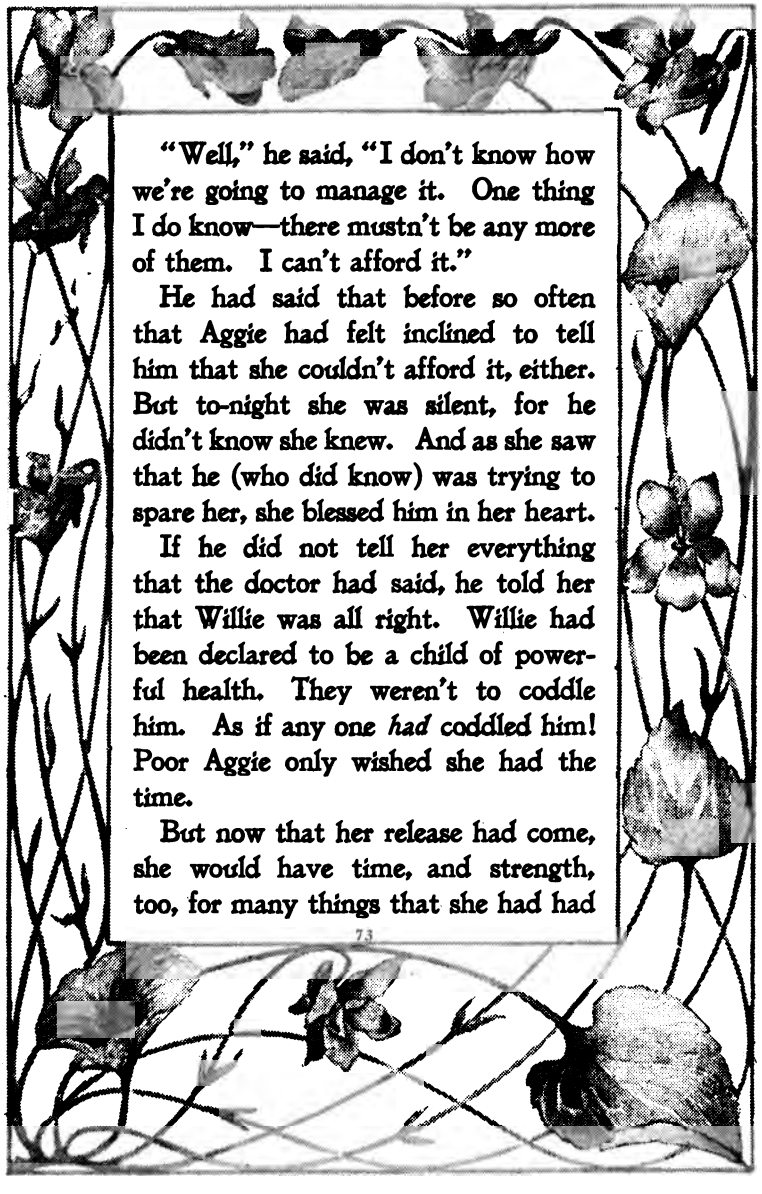
That night her husband told her that her release had come. It had been ordained that she was to rest for two years. And she was to have help. They must have a girl.

"Arthur," she said, firmly, "I won't have a girl. They're worse than charwomen. They eat more; and we can't afford it."

"We *must* afford it. And oh, another thing— Have you ever thought of the children's education?"

Thought of it? She had thought of nothing else, lying awake at night, waiting for the baby's cry; sitting in the daytime, stitching at the small garments that were always just too small.

"Of course," she said, submissively. She was willing to yield the glory of the idea to him.



"Well," he said, "I don't know how we're going to manage it. One thing I do know—there mustn't be any more of them. I can't afford it."

He had said that before so often that Aggie had felt inclined to tell him that she couldn't afford it, either. But to-night she was silent, for he didn't know she knew. And as she saw that he (who did know) was trying to spare her, she blessed him in her heart.

If he did not tell her everything that the doctor had said, he told her that Willie was all right. Willie had been declared to be a child of powerful health. They weren't to coddle him. As if any one *had* coddled him! Poor Aggie only wished she had the time.

But now that her release had come, she would have time, and strength, too, for many things that she had had

to leave undone. She would get nearer to her children, and to her husband, too. Even at four o'clock in the morning, Aggie had joy in spite of her mortal weariness, as she rocked the sleepless baby on the sad breast that had never suckled him. She told the baby all about it, because she couldn't keep it in.

"My beauty," she murmured, "he will always be my baby. He sha'n't have any little brothers or sisters, never any more. There—there—there, did they—? Hsh-sh-sh, my sweet pet, my lamb. My little king—he shall never be dethroned. Hush, hush, my treasure, or he'll wake his poor Daddy, he will."

In another room, on his sleepless pillow, the baby's father turned and groaned.

All the next day, and the next,

Aggie went about with a light step, and with eyes that brightened like a bride's, because of the spring of new love in her heart.

It came over her now how right Arthur had been, how she ought to have kept it up, and how fearfully she had let it go.

Not only the lectures—what did they matter?—but her reading, her music, everything, all the little arts and refinements by which she had once captured Arthur's heart—"Things," she said, "that made all the difference to Arthur." How forbearing and constant he had been!

That evening she dressed her hair and put flowers on the supper-table. Arthur opened his eyes at the unusual appearance, but said nothing. She could see that he was cross about something—something that had oc-

curred in the office, probably. She had never grudged him his outbursts of irritability. It was his only dissipation. Aggie had always congratulated herself on being married to a good man.

Coffee, the beloved luxury they had so long renounced, was served with that supper. But neither of them drank it. Arthur said he wasn't going to be kept awake two nights running, and after that, Aggie's heart was too sore to eat or drink anything. He commented bitterly on the waste. He said he wondered how on earth they were going to pay the doctor's bills, at that rate.

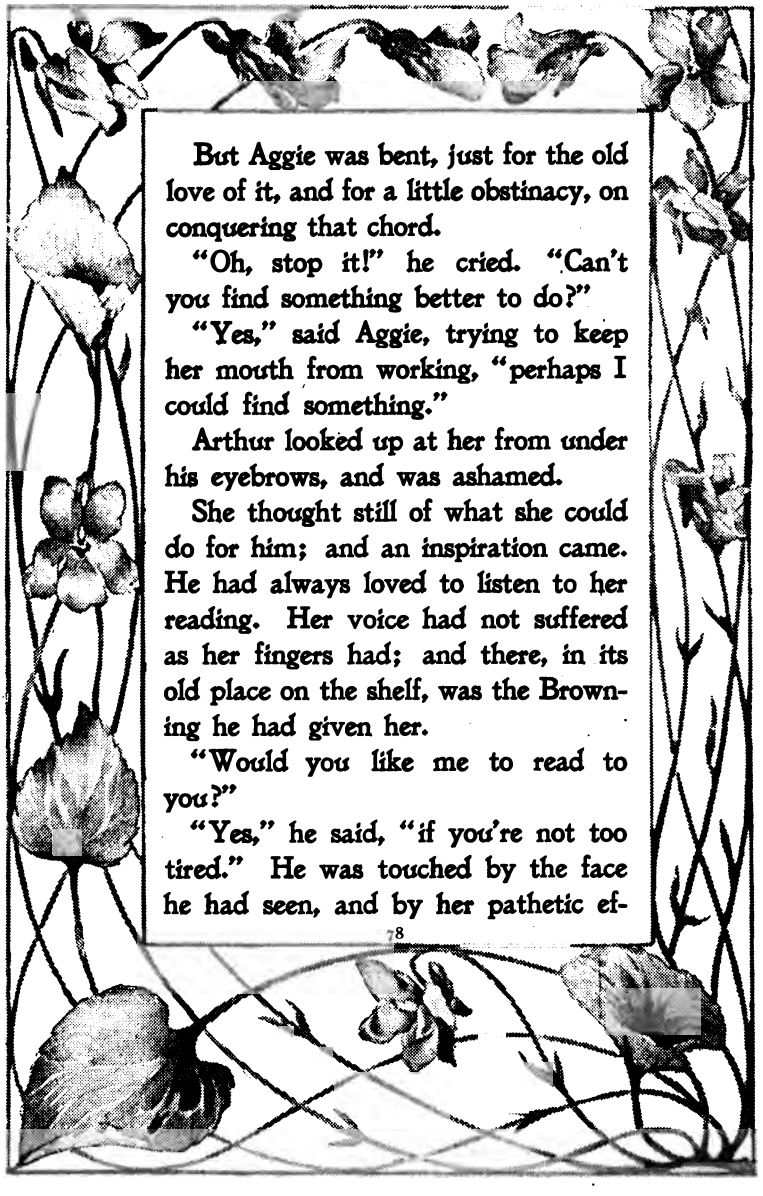
Aggie pondered. He had lain awake all night thinking of the doctor's bills, had he? And yet that was just what they were to have no more of. Anyhow, he had been kept awake; and,

of course, that was enough to make him irritable.

So Aggie thought she would soothe him to sleep. She remembered how he used to go to sleep sometimes in the evenings when she played. And the music, she reflected with her bitterness, would cost nothing.

But music, good music, costs more than anything; and Arthur was fastidious. Aggie's fingers had grown stiff, and their touch had lost its tenderness. Of their old tricks they remembered nothing, except to stumble at a "stretchy" chord, a perfect bullfinch of a chord, bristling with "accidentals," where in their youth they had been apt to shy. Arthur groaned.

"Oh, Lord, there won't be a wink of sleep for either of us if you wake that brat again. What on earth possesses you to strum?"



But Aggie was bent, just for the old love of it, and for a little obstinacy, on conquering that chord.

"Oh, stop it!" he cried. "Can't you find something better to do?"

"Yes," said Aggie, trying to keep her mouth from working, "perhaps I could find something."

Arthur looked up at her from under his eyebrows, and was ashamed.

She thought still of what she could do for him; and an inspiration came. He had always loved to listen to her reading. Her voice had not suffered as her fingers had; and there, in its old place on the shelf, was the Browning he had given her.

"Would you like me to read to you?"

"Yes," he said, "if you're not too tired." He was touched by the face he had seen, and by her pathetic ef-

forts; but oh, he thought, if she would only understand.

She seated herself in the old place opposite him, and read from where the book fell open of its own accord.

"'O, lyric Love, half angel and half bird'"—

Her voice came stammering like a child's, choked with tenderness and many memories—

"'And all a wonder and a wild desire—'"

"Oh no, I say, for Heaven's sake, Aggie, not that rot."

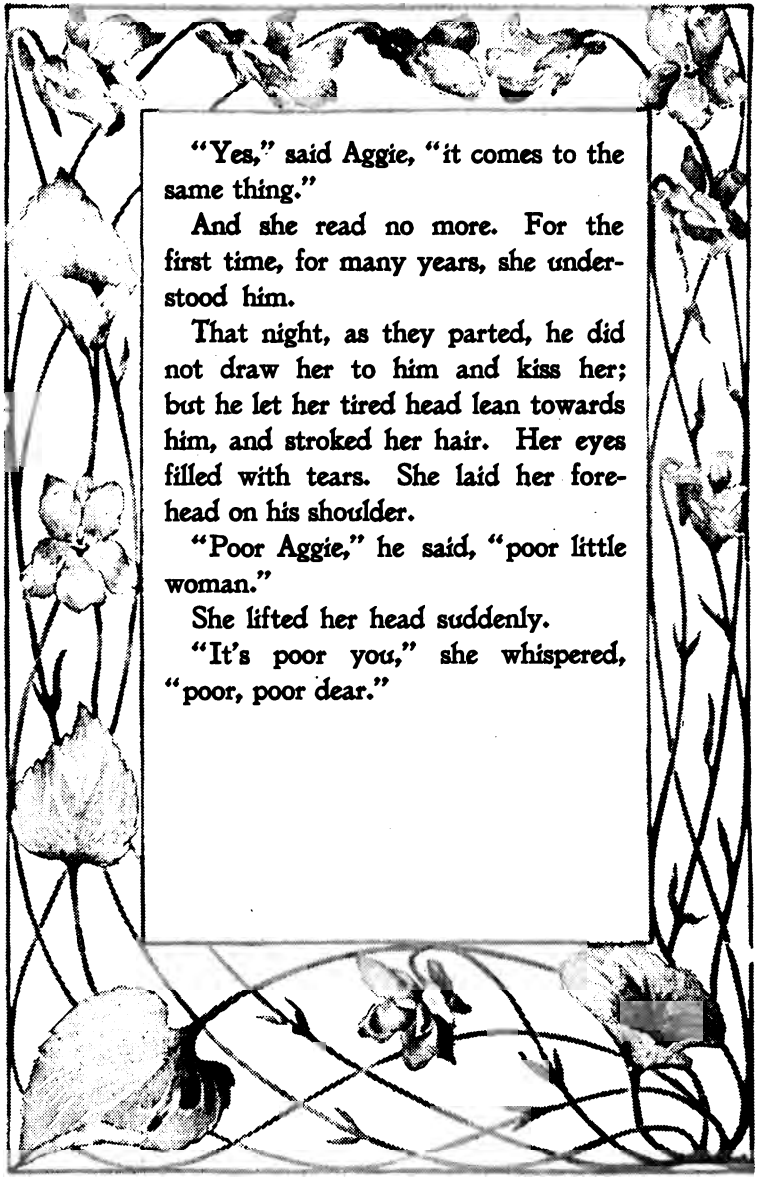
"You—you used to like it."

"Oh, I dare say, years ago. I can't stand it now."

"Can't stand it?"

Again he was softened.

"Can't understand it, perhaps, my dear. But it comes to the same thing."



"Yes," said Aggie, "it comes to the same thing."

And she read no more. For the first time, for many years, she understood him.

That night, as they parted, he did not draw her to him and kiss her; but he let her tired head lean towards him, and stroked her hair. Her eyes filled with tears. She laid her forehead on his shoulder.

"Poor Aggie," he said, "poor little woman."

She lifted her head suddenly.

"It's poor you," she whispered, "poor, poor dear."



"'Now, isn't it a pity for you to be going, dearie?'"

VIII

"NOW, isn't it a pity for you to be going, dearie? When the place is doing you so much good, and Susie back in another week, and all."

Aggie folded up a child's frock with great deliberation, and pressed it, gently but firmly, into the portmanteau.

"I must go," she said, gravely. "Arthur wants me."

Mrs. Purcell was looking on with unfeigned grief at her daughter's preparations for departure. Aggie had gone down to Queningford, not for a flying visit, but to spend the greater

part of the autumn. She and Arthur had had to abandon some of the arrangements they had planned together; and, though he had still insisted in general terms on Aggie's two years' rest, the details had been left to her. Thus it happened that a year of the rest-cure had hardly rolled by before Aggie had broken down, in a way that had filled them both with the gravest anxieties for the future. For if she broke down when she was resting, what would she do when the two years were up and things had to be more or less as they were before? Aggie was so frightened this time that she was glad to be packed off to her mother, with Willie and Dick and Emmy and the baby. The "girls," Kate and Eliza, had looked after them, while Aggie lay back in the warm lap of luxury, and rested for once in her life.

All Aggie's visits had ended in the same way. The same letter from home, the same firm and simple statement: "Arthur wants me. I must go," and Aggie was gone before they had had a look at her.

"John and Susie will be quite offended."

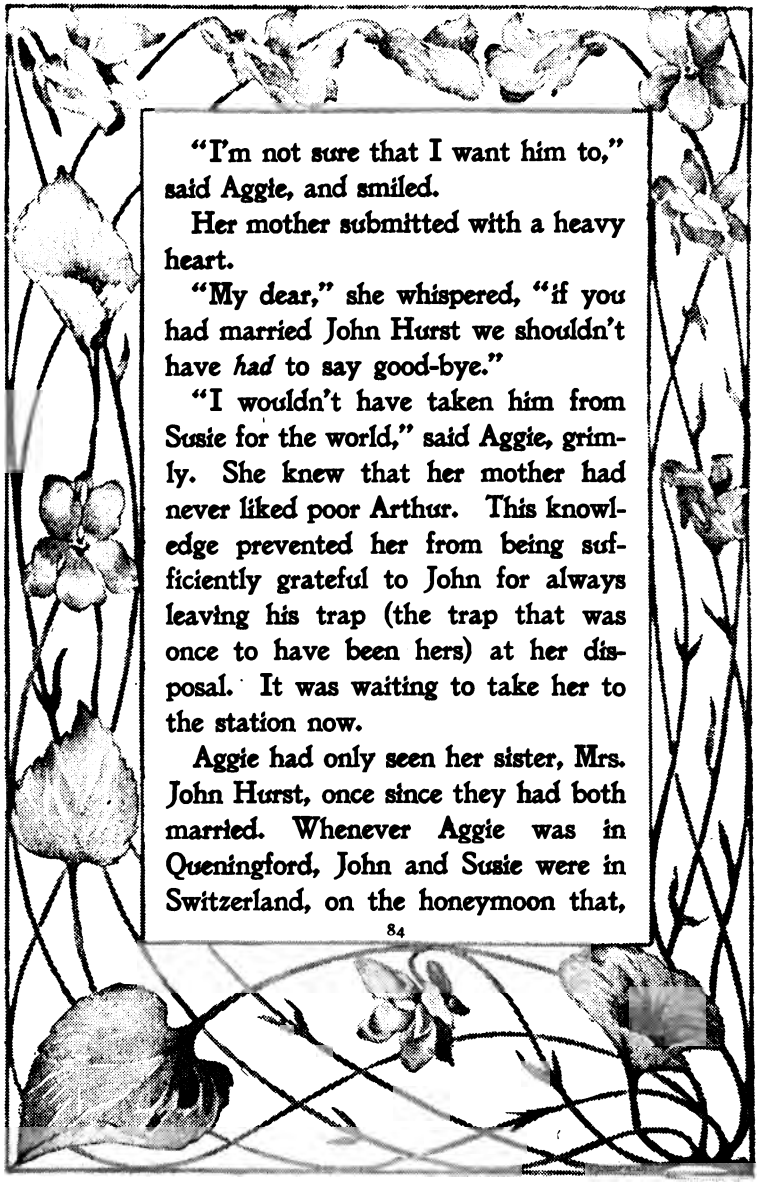
"I can't help it. Arthur comes before John and Susie, and he wants me."

She had always been proud of that—his wanting her; his inability to do without her.

"I don't know," she said, "what he *will* have done without me all this time."

Her mother looked at her sharply, a look that, though outwardly concentrated on Aggie, suggested much inward criticism of Aggie's husband.

"He must learn to do without you," she said, severely.



"I'm not sure that I want him to," said Aggie, and smiled.

Her mother submitted with a heavy heart.

"My dear," she whispered, "if you had married John Hurst we shouldn't have *had* to say good-bye."

"I wouldn't have taken him from Susie for the world," said Aggie, grimly. She knew that her mother had never liked poor Arthur. This knowledge prevented her from being sufficiently grateful to John for always leaving his trap (the trap that was once to have been hers) at her disposal. It was waiting to take her to the station now.

Aggie had only seen her sister, Mrs. John Hurst, once since they had both married. Whenever Aggie was in Queningford, John and Susie were in Switzerland, on the honeymoon that,

for the happy, prosperous couple, renewed itself every year.

This year it was agreed that, when the Hursts came up to Islington for the Grand Horse-Show in the spring, they were to be put up at the Gattys' in Camden Town.

Aggie was excited and a little alarmed at the prospect of this visit. Susie was accustomed to having everything very nice and comfortable about her, and she would be critical of the villa and its ways. And, then, it would be awkward seeing John. She smiled. It always had been awkward seeing John.

But when the spring came a new terror was added to Aggie's hospitable anxiety, a new embarrassment to the general awkwardness of seeing John.

After all, the Hursts put up at a hotel in town. But Susie was to come

over for tea and a long talk with Aggie, John following later.

Aggie prepared with many tremors for the meeting with her sister. She made herself quite sick and faint in her long battling with her hair. She had so little time for "doing" it that it had become very difficult to "do," and when it was "done" she said to herself that it looked abominable. Her fingers shook as they strained at the hooks of the shabby gown that was her "best." She had found somewhere a muslin scarf that, knotted and twined with desperate ingenuity, produced something of the effect that she desired.

Up-stairs in the nursery, Catty, very wise for six years old, was minding the baby, while the little nervous maid got tea ready. Aggie sat in the drawing-room waiting for her sister. Even

as she waited she dared not be idle. There was an old coat of Arthur's that she had been lining, taking advantage of a change to milder weather; it was warmer than the one he was wearing, and she was afraid to let it go another day lest the wind should turn round to the northeast again. In such anxieties Aggie moved and had her being. For the rest, she had given the little maid a lesson in the proper way of showing Mrs. John Hurst into the room when she arrived.

Mrs. John Hurst arrived a little late. She came in unannounced (for her appearance had taken the little maid's breath away); she came with a certain rustle and sweep which was much more important than anything Susie had ever done in the old days when Aggie was the pretty one.

Aggie was moved at seeing her. She uttered a cry of affection and delight, and gave herself to Susie's open arms.

"Darling!" said Mrs. John Hurst. "Let me have a good look at you."

She kissed her violently, held her at arm's-length for a moment, and then kissed her again, very gently. In that moment Aggie had looked at Susie, and Susie at Aggie, each trying to master the meaning of the other's face. It was Susie who understood first. Prosperity was very becoming to Susie. She was the pretty one now, and she knew it. Marriage had done for her what maidenhood had done for her sister, and Susie was the image of what Aggie used to be.

But Aggie herself! Nothing was left now of the diminutive distinction that had caused her to be once adored in Queningford. Susie was young at

two-and-thirty, and Aggie, not three years older, was middle-aged. Not that there were many wrinkles on Aggie's face. Only a deep, crescent line on each side of a mouth that looked as if it had been strained tight with many tortures. It was as if Nature had conceived a grudge against Aggie, and strove, through maternity, to stamp out her features as an individual.

"Oh yes," said Aggie, to break the intolerable tension of that look, "it's one of your old ones, turned and trimmed to make it look different."

"Poor darling," said Susie; but what she thought was that it did look different.

Luckily Mrs. John Hurst was full of the Horse-Show. She could talk of nothing else. It was the Horse-Show that had made her late. She

had waited for the judging. John would look in as soon as he could get away. Gownboy had carried off the gold cup and the gold medal again, and the judges had been unjust, as usual, to John (John, grown prosperous, had added horse-breeding to sheep-farming). Ladslove had only been highly commended. Ladslove was Rosemary's foal.

"You remember Rosemary, Aggie?"

Aggie remembered neither Rosemary nor her foal. But she was sorry for Ladslove. She was grateful to him, too, for holding Susie's attention and diverting it from all the things she didn't want her to see. She was afraid of Susie; afraid of her sympathy; afraid of her saying something about Barbara (*she* couldn't speak of little Bessie, Susie's only child, who had died three years ago).

Above all, she was afraid of Susie's inquisitive tongue and searching eyes.

She flung herself into fictitious reminiscences of the Queningford stud. She couldn't have done worse.

"Oh, Aggie," said her sister, "you *do* mix them up so."

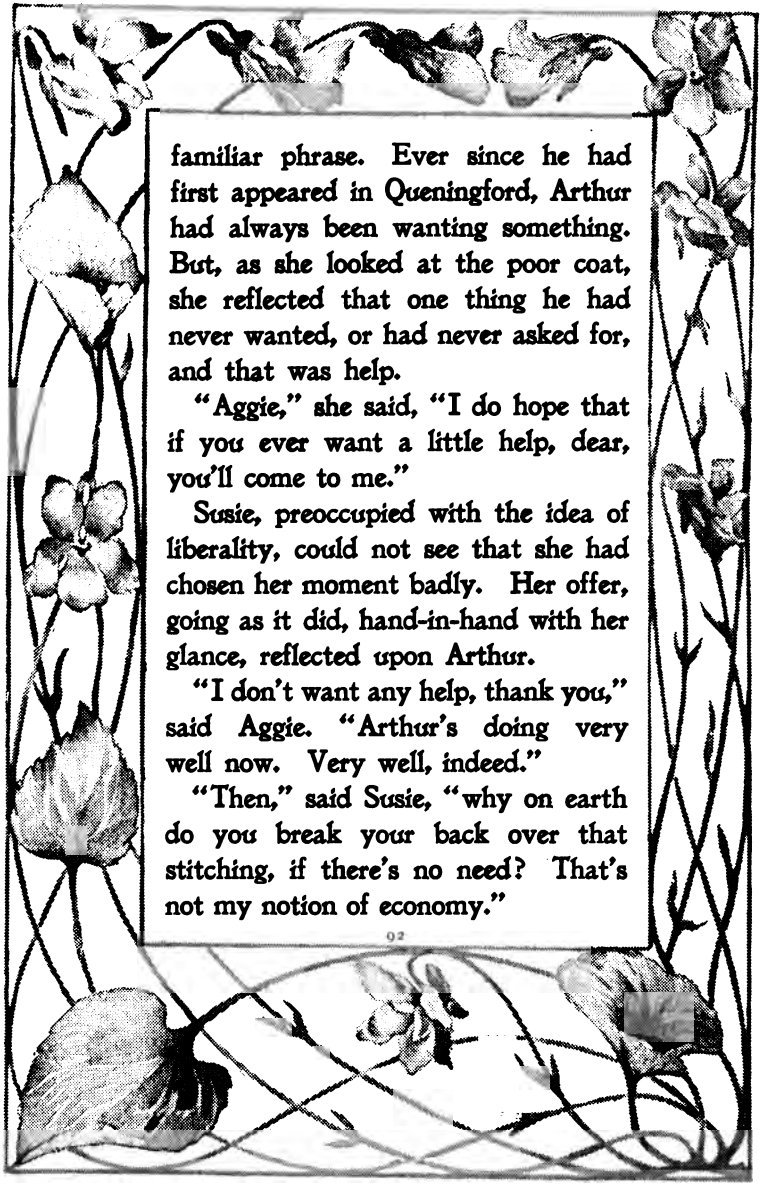
"Well," said poor Aggie, "there are so many of them, I can't keep count."

"Never mind, dear." Aggie's words recalled Susie to her sisterly duties. "I haven't asked after the children yet. How many are there? *I* can't keep count, either, you know."

Aggie turned away, found the old coat she had been lining, and spread it on her lap. Susie's eye roamed and rested on the coat, and Aggie's followed it.

"Do excuse my going on with this. Arthur wants it."

Susie smiled in recognition of the



familiar phrase. Ever since he had first appeared in Queningford, Arthur had always been wanting something. But, as she looked at the poor coat, she reflected that one thing he had never wanted, or had never asked for, and that was help.

"Aggie," she said, "I do hope that if you ever want a little help, dear, you'll come to me."

Susie, preoccupied with the idea of liberality, could not see that she had chosen her moment badly. Her offer, going as it did, hand-in-hand with her glance, reflected upon Arthur.

"I don't want any help, thank you," said Aggie. "Arthur's doing very well now. Very well, indeed."

"Then," said Susie, "why on earth do you break your back over that stitching, if there's no need? That's not my notion of economy."

Susie was a kind-hearted woman, but eight years of solid comfort and prosperity had blunted her perceptions. Moreover, she had an earnestly practical mind, a mind for which material considerations outweighed every other.

"My dear Susie, your notion of economy would be the same as mine, if you had had seven children."

"But I haven't," said Susie, sadly. She was humbled by the rebuff she had just received. "I only wish I had."

Aggie looked up from her work with a remorseful tenderness in her tired eyes. She was sorry for poor Susie, who had lost her only one.

But Susie had already regretted her momentary weakness, and her pride was up. She was a primitive woman, and had always feared lest reproach should lie upon her among the mothers

of many children. Besides, she had never forgotten that her John had loved Aggie first. Aggie, with her seven children, should not set her down as a woman slighted by her husband.

"I haven't had the strength for it," said she; and Aggie winced. "The doctor told John I mustn't have more than the one. And I haven't."

Poor Aggie hardened her face before Susie's eyes, for she felt that they were spying out and judging her. And Susie, seeing that set look, remembered how badly Aggie had once behaved to her John. Therefore she was tempted to extol him.

"But then," said she, magnificently, "I have my husband." (As if Aggie hadn't hers!) "Nobody knows what John is but me. Do you know, there hasn't been one unkind word

passed between us, nor one cross look, ever since he married me eight years ago."

"There are very few who can say that." Aggie tried to throw a ring of robust congratulation into her flat tones.

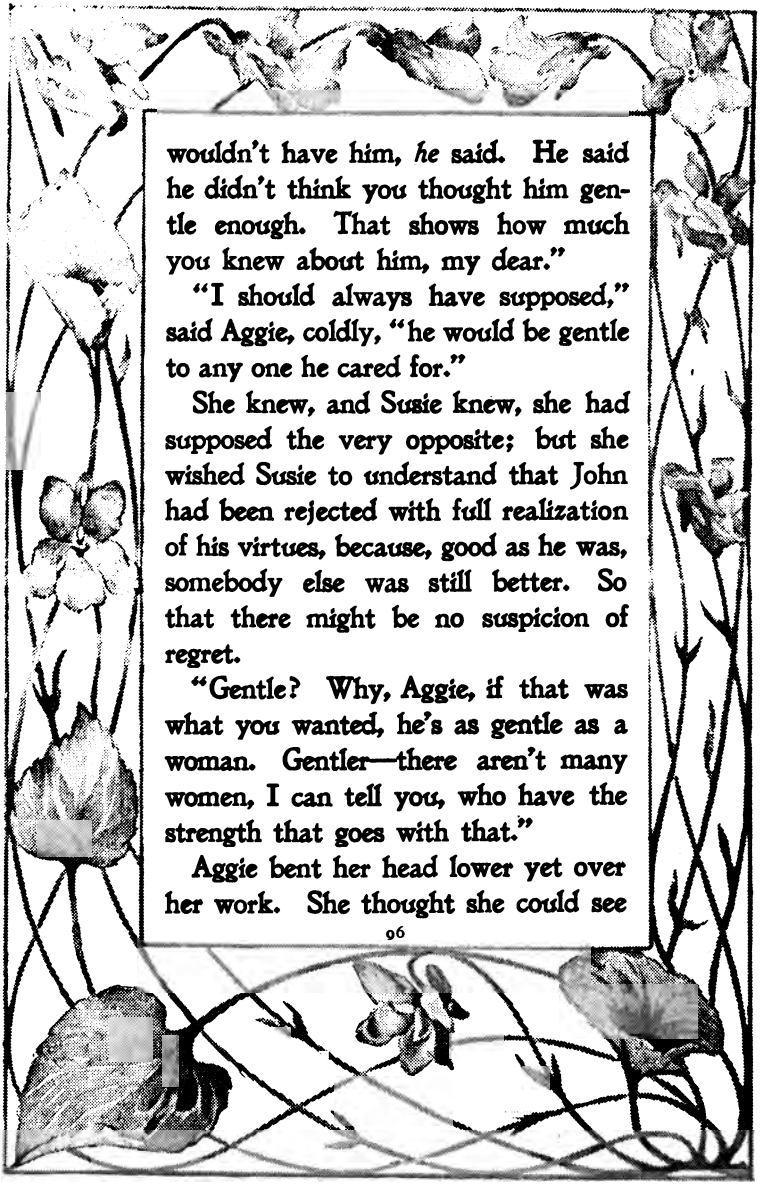
"Very few. But there's no one like him."

"No one like you, either, I should say."

"Well, for him there isn't. He's never had eyes for any one but me—never."

Aggie cast down her eyes demurely at that. She had no desire to hurt Susie by reminding her of the facts. But Susie, being sensitive on the subject, had provided for all that.

"Of course, dear, I know, just at first, he thought of you. A fancy. He told me all about it; and how you



wouldn't have him, *he* said. He said he didn't think you thought him gentle enough. That shows how much you knew about him, my dear."

"I should always have supposed," said Aggie, coldly, "he would be gentle to any one he cared for."

She knew, and Susie knew, she had supposed the very opposite; but she wished Susie to understand that John had been rejected with full realization of his virtues, because, good as he was, somebody else was still better. So that there might be no suspicion of regret.

"Gentle? Why, Aggie, if that was what you wanted, he's as gentle as a woman. Gentler—there aren't many women, I can tell you, who have the strength that goes with that."

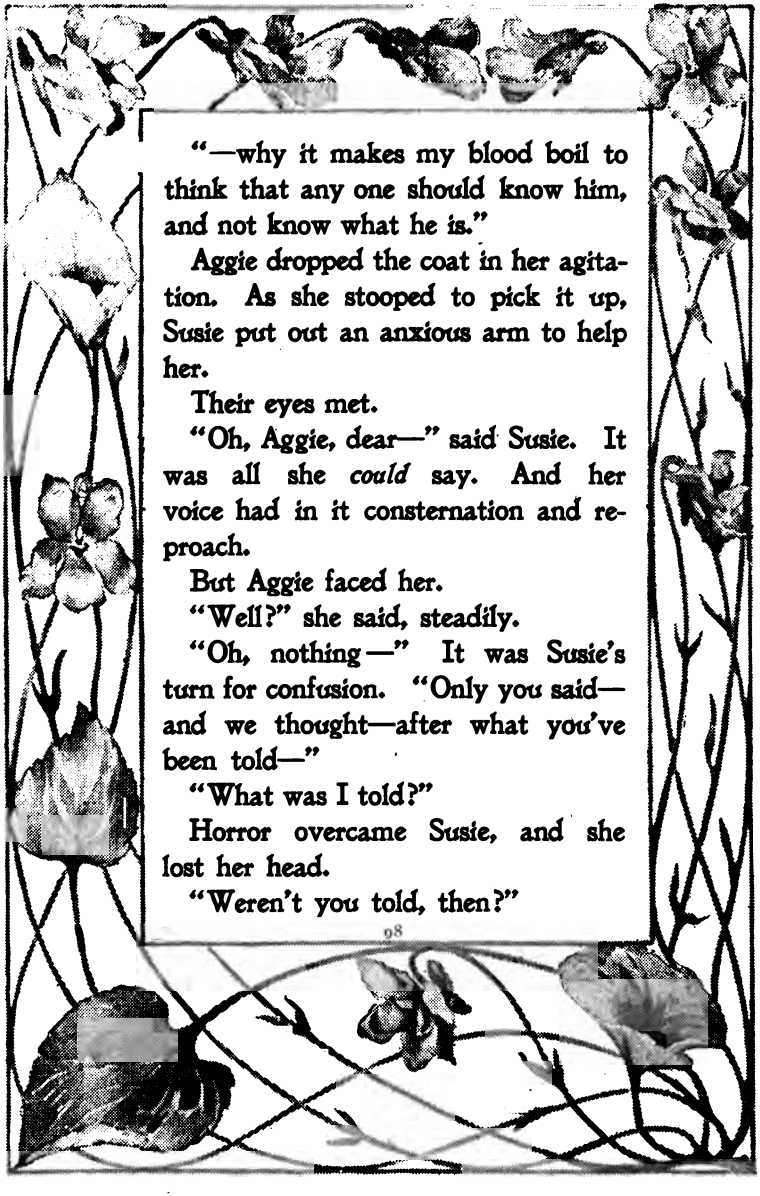
Aggie bent her head lower yet over her work. She thought she could see

in Susie's speech a vindictive and critical intention. All the time she had, Aggie thought, been choosing her words judicially, so that each unnecessary eulogy of John should strike at some weak spot in poor Arthur. She felt that Susie was not above paying off her John's old scores by an oblique and cowardly blow at the man who had supplanted him. She wished that Susie would either leave off talking about John, or go.

But Susie still interpreted Aggie's looks as a challenge, and the hymn of praise swelled on.

"My dear—if John wasn't an angel of goodness and unselfishness— When I think how useless I am to him, and of all that he has done for me, and all that he has given up—"

Aggie was trembling. She drew up the coat to shelter her.



"—why it makes my blood boil to think that any one should know him, and not know what he is."

Aggie dropped the coat in her agitation. As she stooped to pick it up, Susie put out an anxious arm to help her.

Their eyes met.

"Oh, Aggie, dear—" said Susie. It was all she *could* say. And her voice had in it consternation and reproach.

But Aggie faced her.

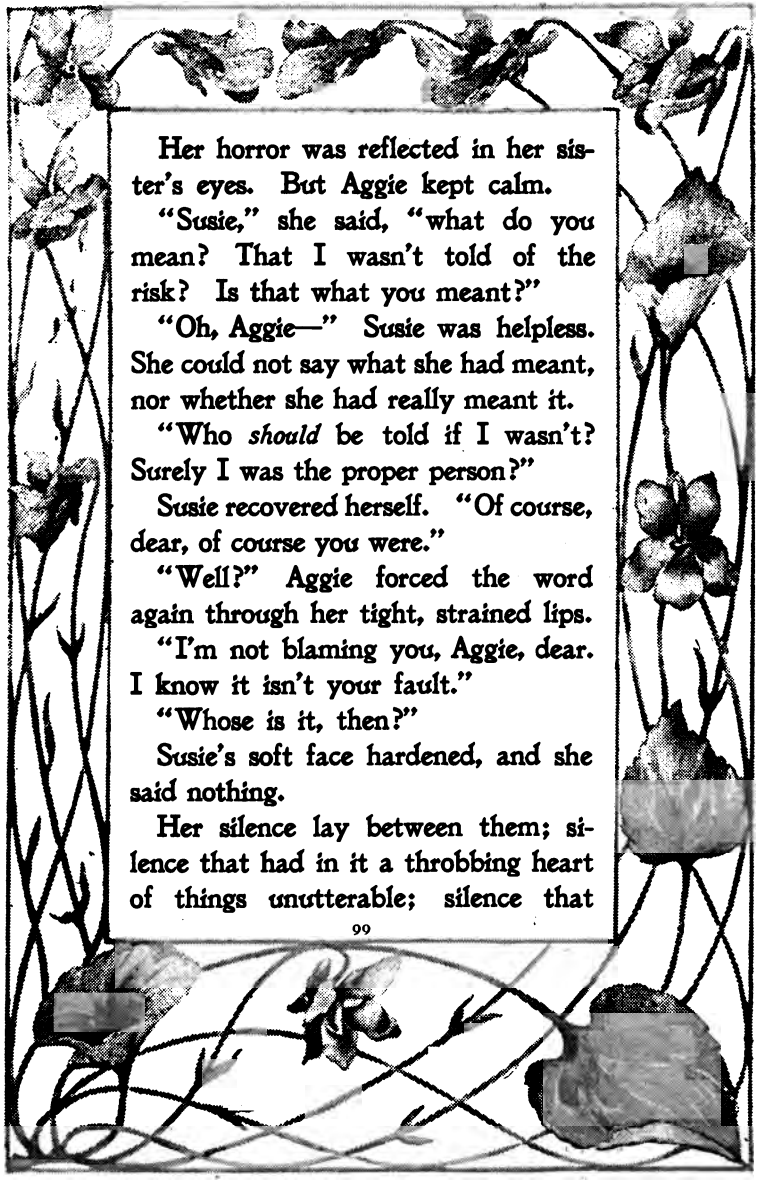
"Well?" she said, steadily.

"Oh, nothing—" It was Susie's turn for confusion. "Only you said—and we thought—after what you've been told—"

"What was I told?"

Horror overcame Susie, and she lost her head.

"Weren't you told, then?"



Her horror was reflected in her sister's eyes. But Aggie kept calm.

"Susie," she said, "what do you mean? That I wasn't told of the risk? Is that what you meant?"

"Oh, Aggie—" Susie was helpless. She could not say what she had meant, nor whether she had really meant it.

"Who *should* be told if I wasn't? Surely I was the proper person?"

Susie recovered herself. "Of course, dear, of course you were."

"Well?" Aggie forced the word again through her tight, strained lips.

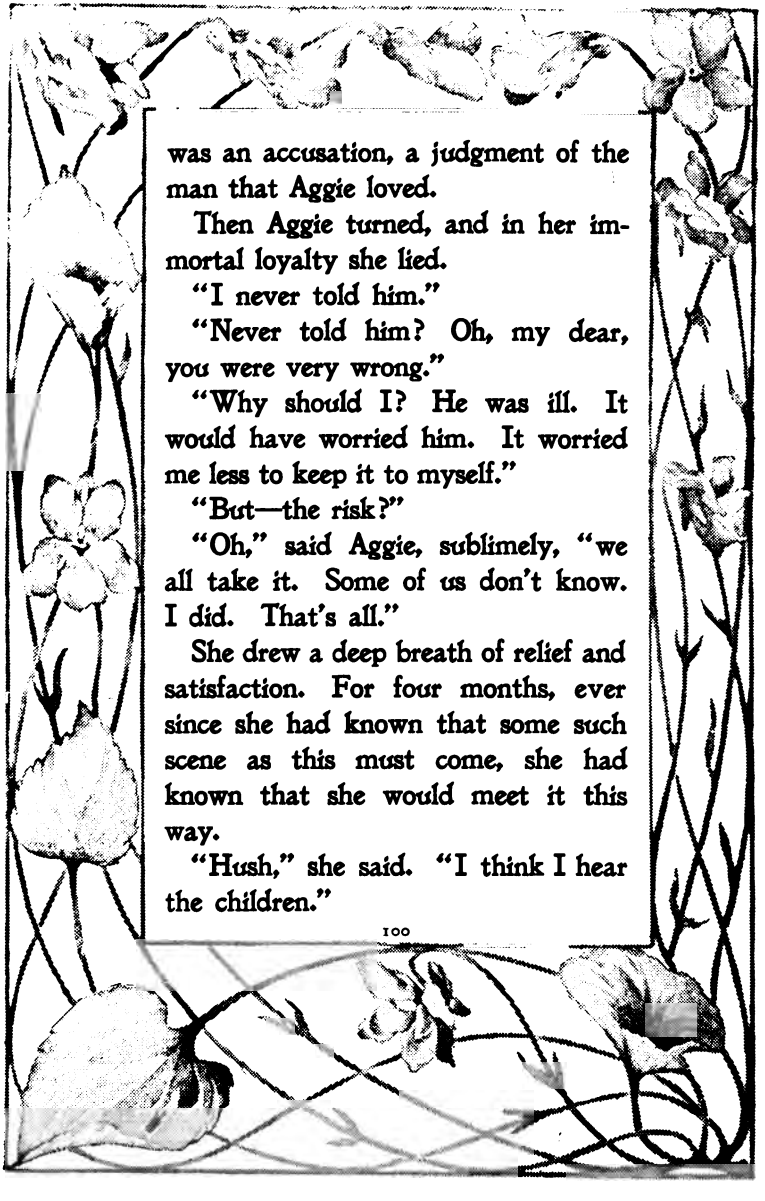
"I'm not blaming you, Aggie, dear. I know it isn't your fault."

"Whose is it, then?"

Susie's soft face hardened, and she said nothing.

Her silence lay between them; silence that had in it a throbbing heart of things unutterable; silence that

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was an accusation, a judgment of the man that Aggie loved.

Then Aggie turned, and in her immortal loyalty she lied.

"I never told him."

"Never told him? Oh, my dear, you were very wrong."

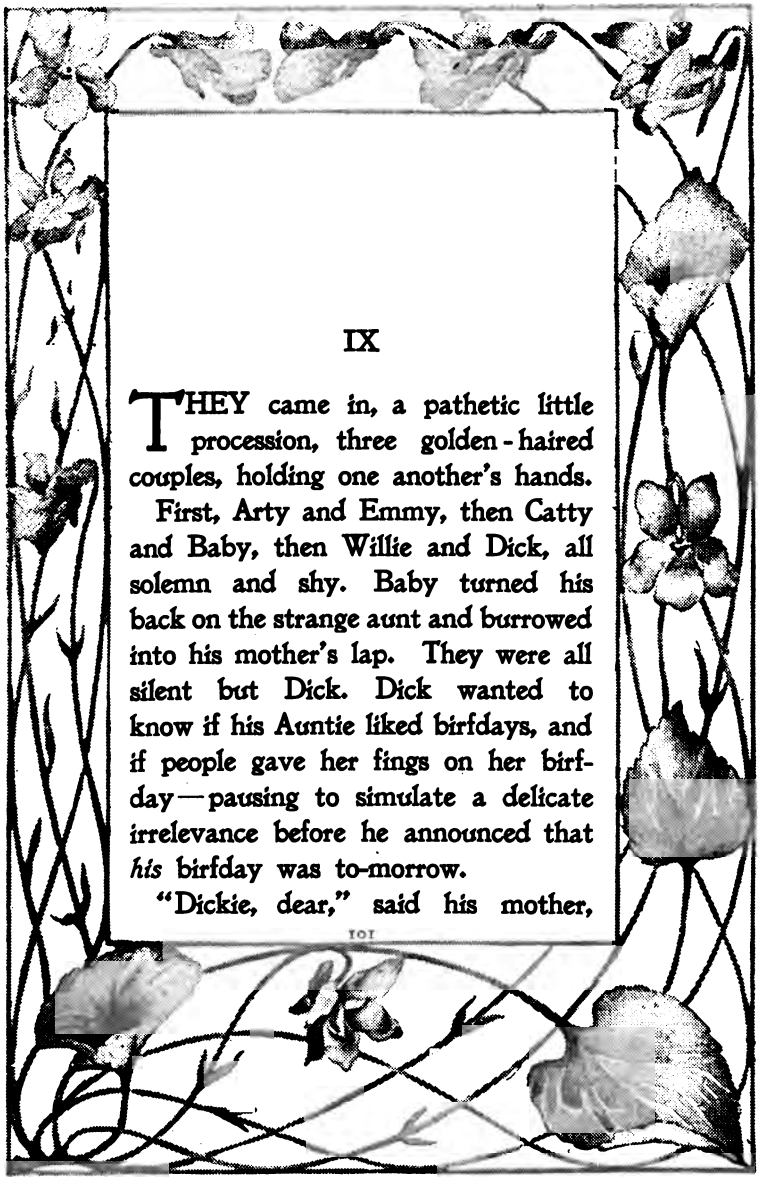
"Why should I? He was ill. It would have worried him. It worried me less to keep it to myself."

"But—the risk?"

"Oh," said Aggie, sublimely, "we all take it. Some of us don't know. I did. That's all."

She drew a deep breath of relief and satisfaction. For four months, ever since she had known that some such scene as this must come, she had known that she would meet it this way.

"Hush," she said. "I think I hear the children."



IX

THEY came in, a pathetic little procession, three golden-haired couples, holding one another's hands.

First, Arty and Emmy, then Catty and Baby, then Willie and Dick, all solemn and shy. Baby turned his back on the strange aunt and burrowed into his mother's lap. They were all silent but Dick. Dick wanted to know if his Auntie liked birfdays, and if people gave her fings on her birfday—pausing to simulate a delicate irrelevance before he announced that *his* birfday was to-morrow.

"Dickie, dear," said his mother,

nervously, "we don't talk about our birthdays before they've come."

She could not bear Susie to be able to say that one of her children had given so gross a hint.

The children pressed round her, and her hands were soon at their proud and anxious work: coaxing stray curls into their place; proving the strength of the little arms; slipping a sock, to show the marbled rose of the round limbs.

"Just feel Emmy's legs. She's as firm as firm. And look at Baby, how beautifully he's made. They're all healthy. There isn't an unsweet, unsound spot in one of them."

"No, no, they look it. They're magnificent. And they're you all over again."

"Barbara wasn't. She was the very image of her father." Her love of him



"'There isn't an unsweet, unsound spot in one of them'"

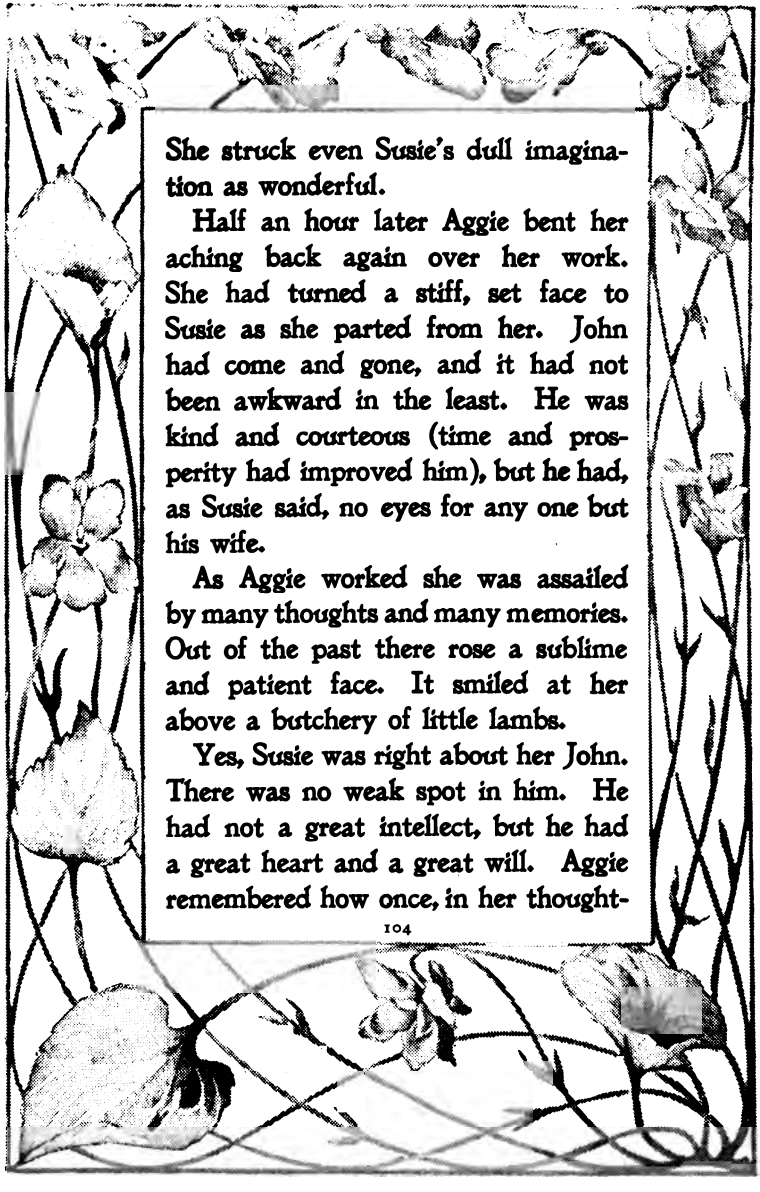
conquered the stubborn silence of her grief, so that she did not shrink from the beloved name.

"Susie," she said, when the little procession had, at its own petition, filed solemnly out again, "you can't say you've seen too much of them."

Susie smiled sadly as she looked at the wreck that was poor Aggie. "No, my dear; but I haven't seen quite enough of you. There isn't much left of you, you know."

"Me?" She paused, and then broke out again, triumphant in her justification: "No matter if there's nothing left of me. *They're* alive."

She raised her head. Worn out and broken down she might be, but she was the mother of superb children. Something stronger and more beautiful than her lost youth flamed in her as she vindicated her motherhood.



She struck even Susie's dull imagination as wonderful.

Half an hour later Aggie bent her aching back again over her work. She had turned a stiff, set face to Susie as she parted from her. John had come and gone, and it had not been awkward in the least. He was kind and courteous (time and prosperity had improved him), but he had, as Susie said, no eyes for any one but his wife.

As Aggie worked she was assailed by many thoughts and many memories. Out of the past there rose a sublime and patient face. It smiled at her above a butchery of little lambs.

Yes, Susie was right about her John. There was no weak spot in him. He had not a great intellect, but he had a great heart and a great will. Aggie remembered how once, in her thought-

ful maiden days, she had read in one of the vicar's books a saying which had struck her at the time, for the vicar had underlined it twice. "If there is aught spiritual in man, it is the Will." She had not thought of John as a very spiritual person. She had dimly divined in him the possibility of strong passions, such passions as make shipwreck of men's lives. And here was Arthur—he, poor dear, would never be shipwrecked, for he hadn't one strong passion in him; he had only a few weak little impulses, incessantly frustrating a will weaker than them all. She remembered how her little undeveloped soul, with its flutterings and strugglings after the immaterial, had been repelled by the large presence of the natural man. It had been afraid to trust itself to his strength, lest its

wings should suffer for it. It had not been afraid to trust itself to Arthur; and his weakness had made it a wingless thing, dragged down by the suffering of her body.

She said to herself, "If I had known John was like that—"

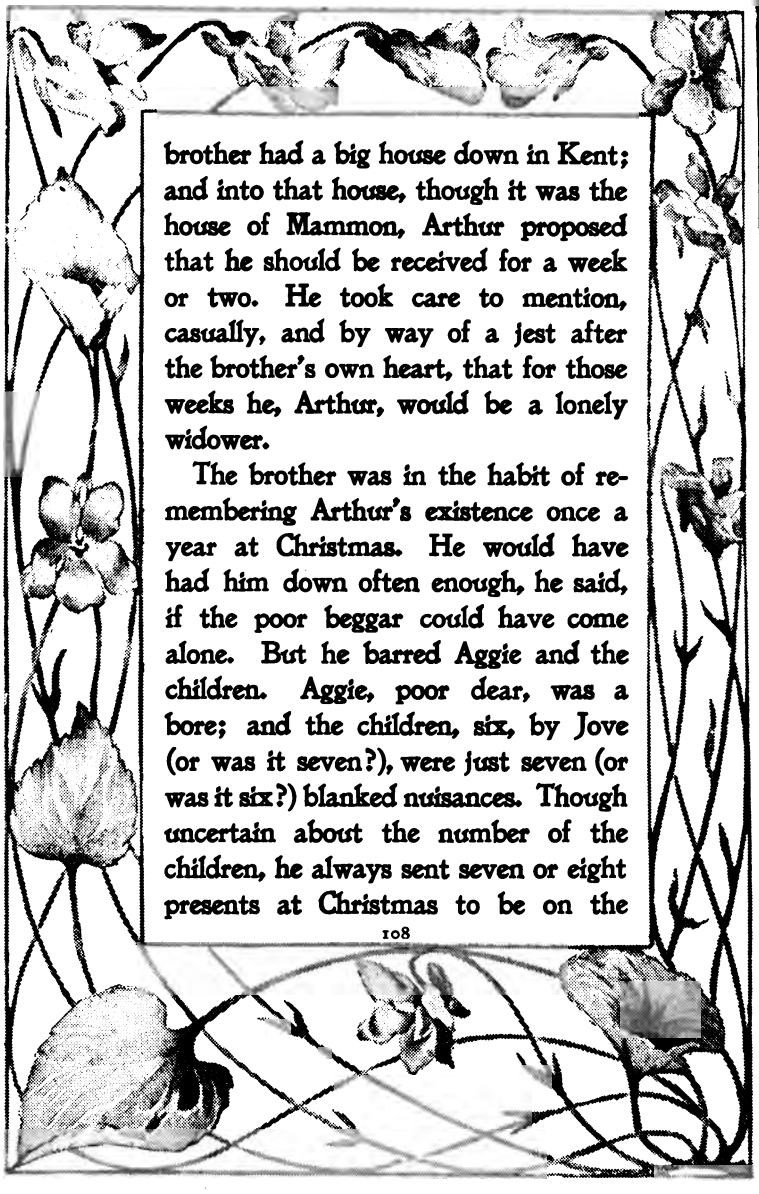
She stopped her brain before it could answer for her! "You wouldn't be sitting here now stitching at that coat."

She stitched on till she could see to stitch no more; for tears came and blinded her eyes, and fell upon the coat.

That was just after she had kissed it.

X

IT was Easter, three weeks after Susie's visit; and Arthur was going away for a fortnight, his first real holiday in seven years. For some time he had been lengthening out his office hours, and increasing his salary, by adding night to day. And now he had worn himself out by his own ferocious industry. He knew, and Aggie knew, that he was in for a bad illness if he didn't get away, and at once. He had written in his extremity to a bachelor brother, known in the little house at Camden Town as the Mammon of Unrighteousness. The



brother had a big house down in Kent; and into that house, though it was the house of Mammon, Arthur proposed that he should be received for a week or two. He took care to mention, casually, and by way of a jest after the brother's own heart, that for those weeks he, Arthur, would be a lonely widower.

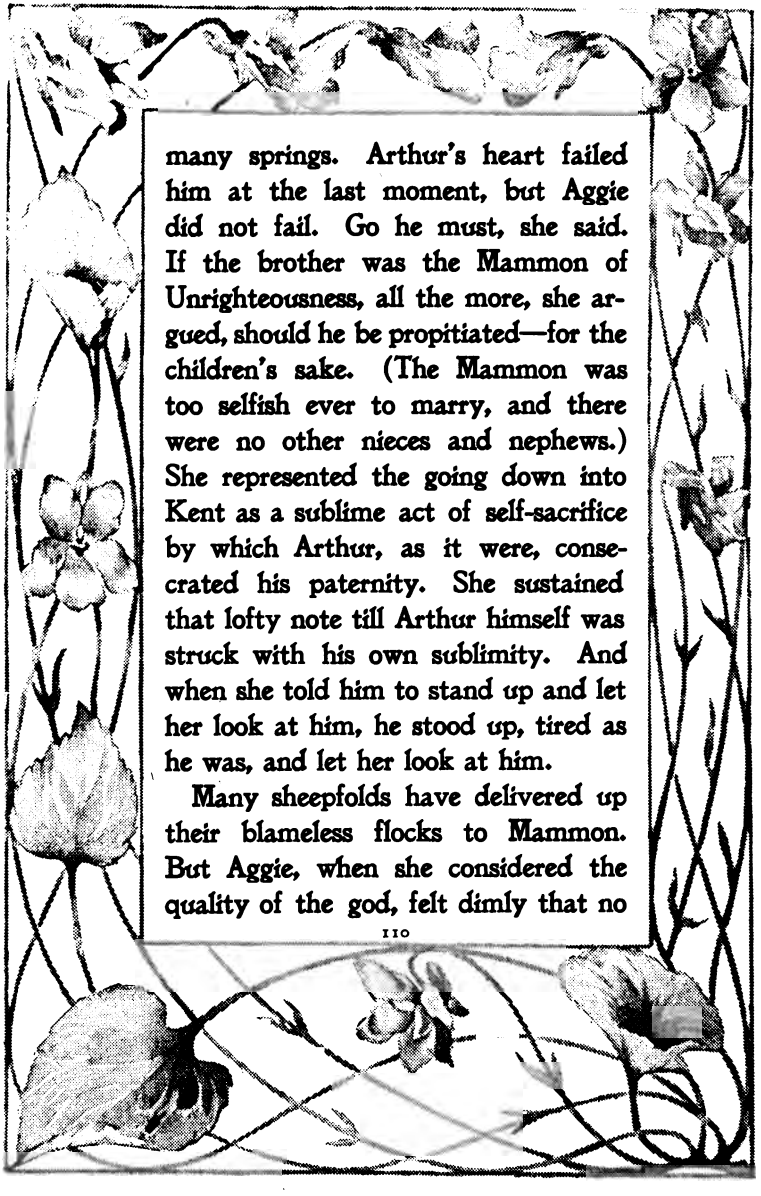
The brother was in the habit of remembering Arthur's existence once a year at Christmas. He would have had him down often enough, he said, if the poor beggar could have come alone. But he barred Aggie and the children. Aggie, poor dear, was a bore; and the children, six, by Jove (or was it seven?), were just seven (or was it six?) blanked nuisances. Though uncertain about the number of the children, he always sent seven or eight presents at Christmas to be on the

safe side. So when Arthur announced that he was a widower, the brother, in his bachelor home, gave a great roar of genial laughter. He saw an opportunity of paying off all his debts to Arthur in a comparatively easy fashion all at once.

"Take him for a fortnight, poor devil? I'd take him for ten fortnights. Heavens, what a relief it must be to get away from 'Aggie'!"

And when Arthur got his brother's letter, he and Aggie were quite sorry that they had ever called him the Mammon of Unrighteousness.

But the brother kept good company down in Kent. Aggie knew that, in the old abominable Queningford phrase, he was "in with the county." She saw her Arthur mixing in gay garden scenes, with a cruel spring sun shining on the shabby suit that had seen so



many springs. Arthur's heart failed him at the last moment, but Aggie did not fail. Go he must, she said. If the brother was the Mammon of Unrighteousness, all the more, she argued, should he be propitiated—for the children's sake. (The Mammon was too selfish ever to marry, and there were no other nieces and nephews.) She represented the going down into Kent as a sublime act of self-sacrifice by which Arthur, as it were, consecrated his paternity. She sustained that lofty note till Arthur himself was struck with his own sublimity. And when she told him to stand up and let her look at him, he stood up, tired as he was, and let her look at him.

Many sheepfolds have delivered up their blameless flocks to Mammon. But Aggie, when she considered the quality of the god, felt dimly that no

more innocent victim was ever yet provided than poor, jaded Arthur in his suit of other years. The thought in her mind was that it would not do for him to look *too* innocent. He must go—but not like that.

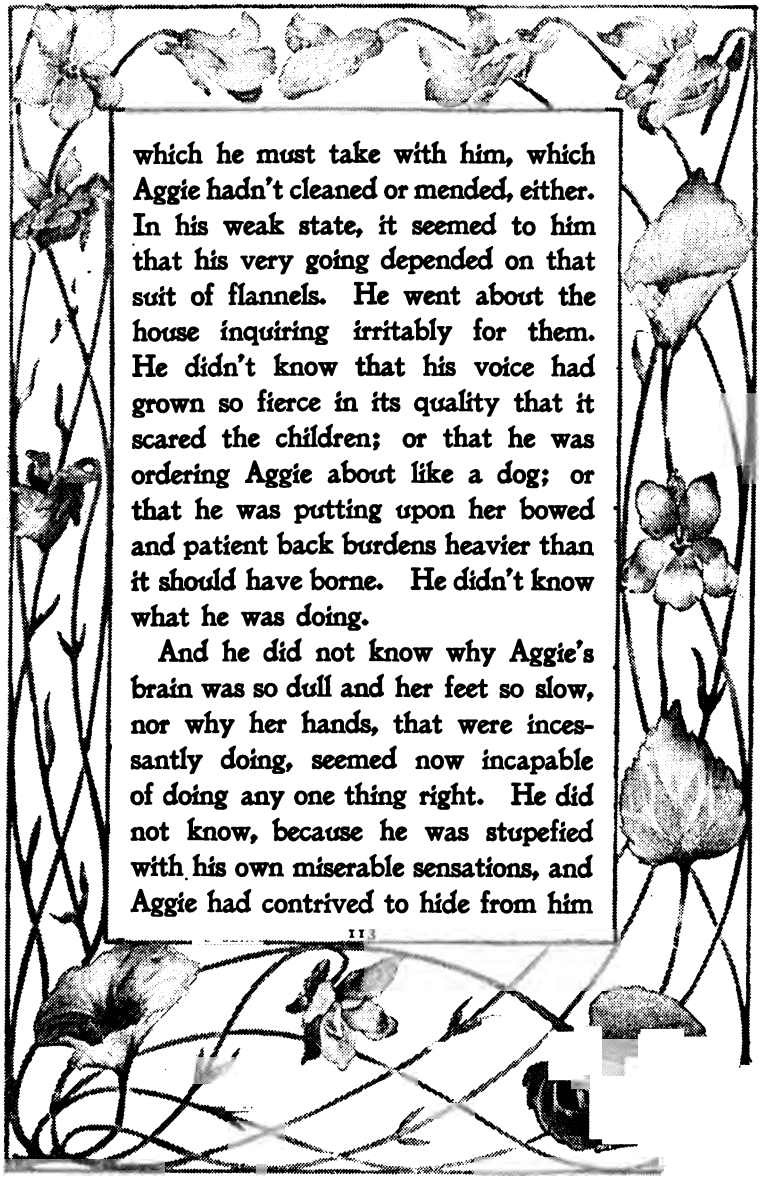
So, for three days of blinding labor, Aggie applied herself to the propitiation of Mammon, the sending forth of her sacrificial lamb properly decked for the sacrifice. There never had been such a hauling and overhauling of clothes, such folding and unfolding, such stitching and darning and cleansing and pressing, such dragging out and packing of heavy portmanteaus, such a getting up of shirts that should be irreproachable.

Aggie did it all herself; she would trust no one, least of all the laundress. She had only faint old visions of John Hurst's collars to guide her; but she

was upheld by an immense relief, born of her will to please, and Arthur, by a blind reliance, born of his utter weariness. At times these preparations wellnigh exasperated him. "If going meant all that fuss," he said, "he'd rather not go." But if he had been told that anything would happen to prevent his going, he would have sat down and cursed or cried. His nerves clamored for change now—any change from the office and the horrible yellow villa in Camden Town.

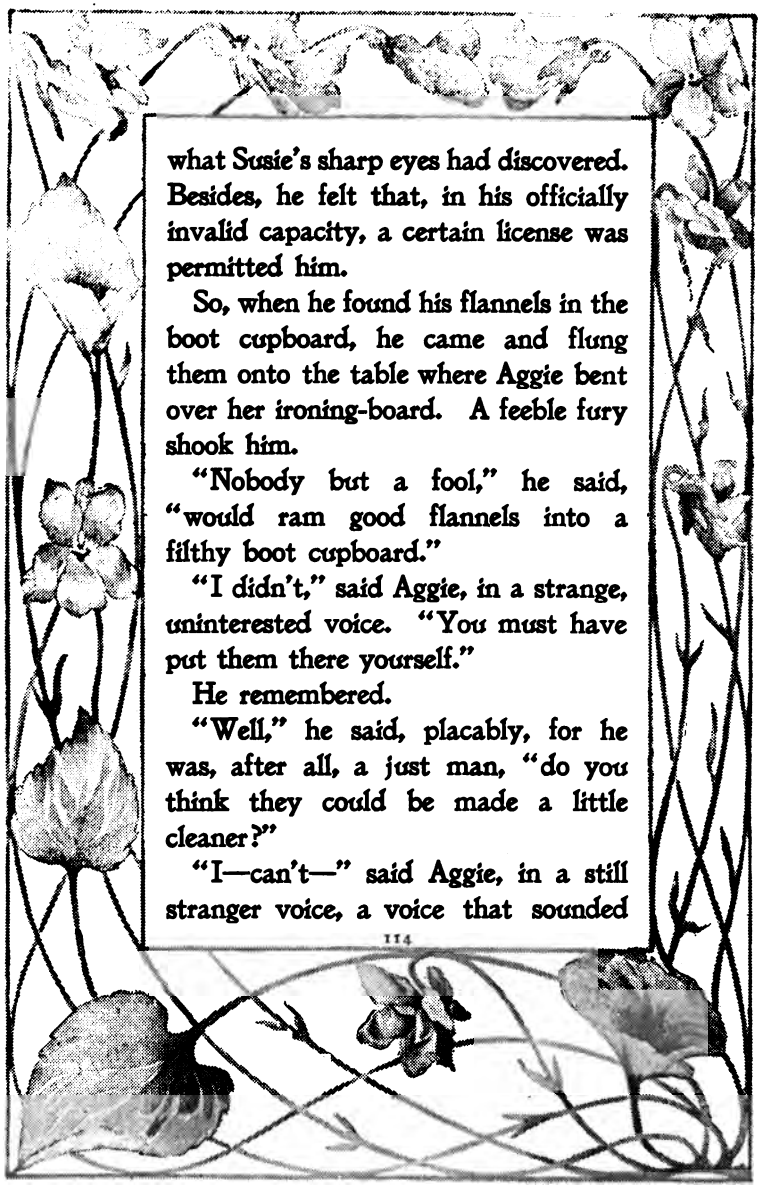
All of a sudden, at the critical moment, Aggie's energy showed signs of slowing down, and it seemed to both of them that she would never get him off.

Then, for the first time, he woke to a dreary interest in the packing. He began to think of things for himself. He thought of a certain suit of flannels



which he must take with him, which Aggie hadn't cleaned or mended, either. In his weak state, it seemed to him that his very going depended on that suit of flannels. He went about the house inquiring irritably for them. He didn't know that his voice had grown so fierce in its quality that it scared the children; or that he was ordering Aggie about like a dog; or that he was putting upon her bowed and patient back burdens heavier than it should have borne. He didn't know what he was doing.

And he did not know why Aggie's brain was so dull and her feet so slow, nor why her hands, that were incessantly doing, seemed now incapable of doing any one thing right. He did not know, because he was stupefied with his own miserable sensations, and Aggie had contrived to hide from him



what Susie's sharp eyes had discovered. Besides, he felt that, in his officially invalid capacity, a certain license was permitted him.

So, when he found his flannels in the boot cupboard, he came and flung them onto the table where Aggie bent over her ironing-board. A feeble fury shook him.

"Nobody but a fool," he said, "would ram good flannels into a filthy boot cupboard."

"I didn't," said Aggie, in a strange, uninterested voice. "You must have put them there yourself."

He remembered.

"Well," he said, placably, for he was, after all, a just man, "do you think they could be made a little cleaner?"

"I—can't—" said Aggie, in a still stranger voice, a voice that sounded

as if it were deflected somehow by her bent body and came from another woman rather far away. It made Arthur turn in the doorway and look at her. She rose, straightening herself slowly, dragging herself upward from the table with both hands. Her bleached lips parted; she drew in her breath with a quick sound like a sob, and let it out again on a sharp note of pain.

He rushed to her, all his sunken manhood roused by her bitter, helpless cry.

"Aggie, darling, what is it? Are you ill?"

"No, no, I'm not ill; I'm only tired," she sobbed, clutching at him with her two hands, and swaying where she stood.

He took her in his arms and half dragged, half carried her from the

room. On the narrow stairs they paused.

"Let me go alone," she whispered.

She tried to free herself from his grasp, failed, and laid her head back on his shoulder again; and he lifted her and carried her to her bed.

He knelt down and took off her shoes. He sat beside her, supporting her while he let down her long, thin braids of hair. She looked up at him, and saw that there was still no knowledge in the frightened eyes that gazed at her; and when he would have unfastened the bodice of her gown, she pushed back his hands and held them.

"No, no," she whimpered. "Go away. Go away."

"Aggie—"

"Go away, I tell you."

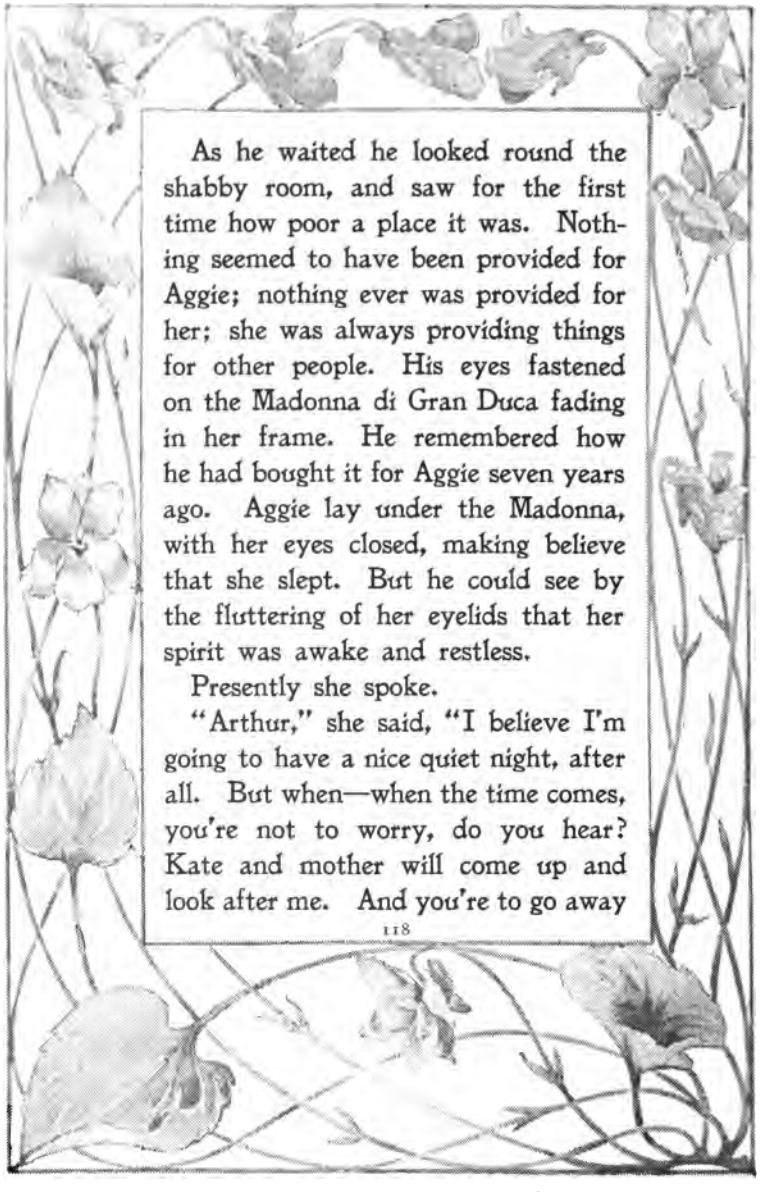
"My God," he moaned, more smitten, more helpless than she. For, as

she turned from him, he understood the height and depth of her tender perjury. She had meant to spare him for as long as it might be, because, afterwards (she must have felt), his own conscience would not be so merciful.

He undressed her, handling her with his clumsy gentleness, and laid her in her bed.

He had called the maid; she went bustling to and fro, loud-footed and wild-eyed. From time to time a cry came from the nursery where the little ones were left alone. Outside, down the street, Arty and Catty ran hand-in-hand to fetch the doctor, their sobbing checked by a mastering sense of their service and importance.

And the man, more helpless than any child, clung to the woman's hand and waited with her for her hour.



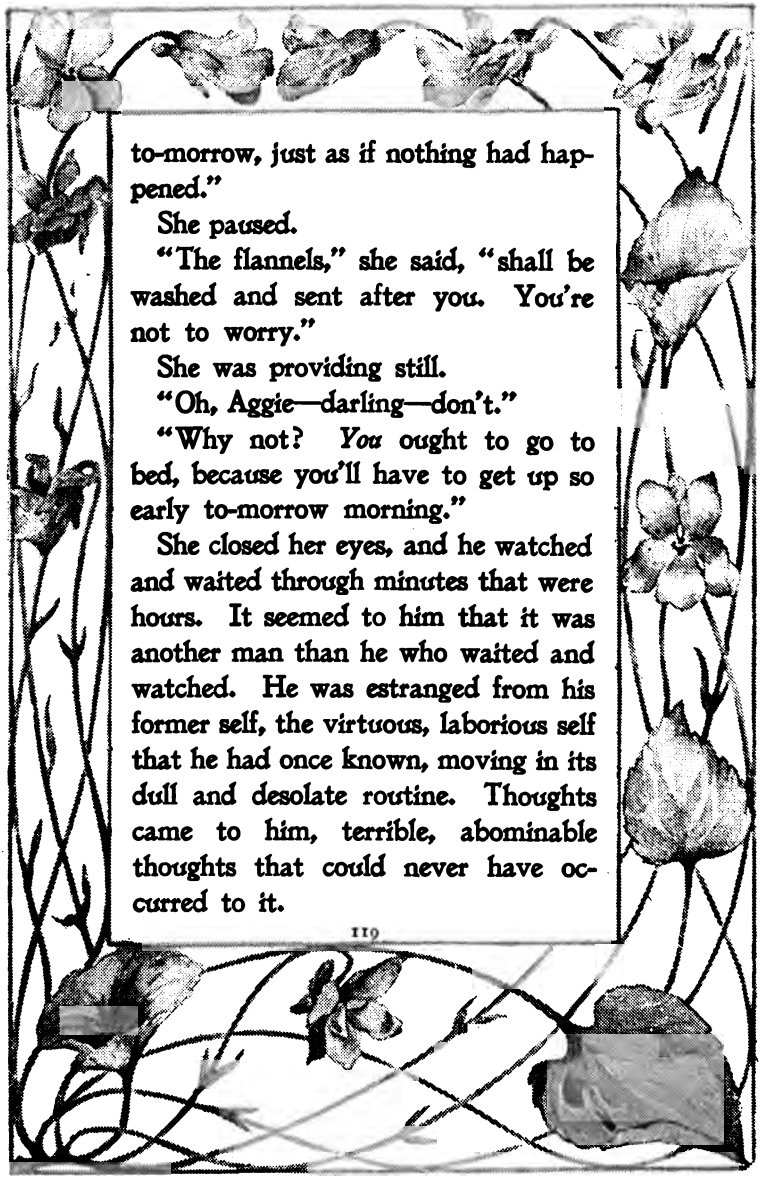
As he waited he looked round the shabby room, and saw for the first time how poor a place it was. Nothing seemed to have been provided for Aggie; nothing ever was provided for her; she was always providing things for other people. His eyes fastened on the Madonna di Gran Duca fading in her frame. He remembered how he had bought it for Aggie seven years ago. Aggie lay under the Madonna, with her eyes closed, making believe that she slept. But he could see by the fluttering of her eyelids that her spirit was awake and restless.

Presently she spoke.

"Arthur," she said, "I believe I'm going to have a nice quiet night, after all. But when—when the time comes, you're not to worry, do you hear? Kate and mother will come up and look after me. And you're to go away



"Thoughts came to him, terrible thoughts"



to-morrow, just as if nothing had happened."

She paused.

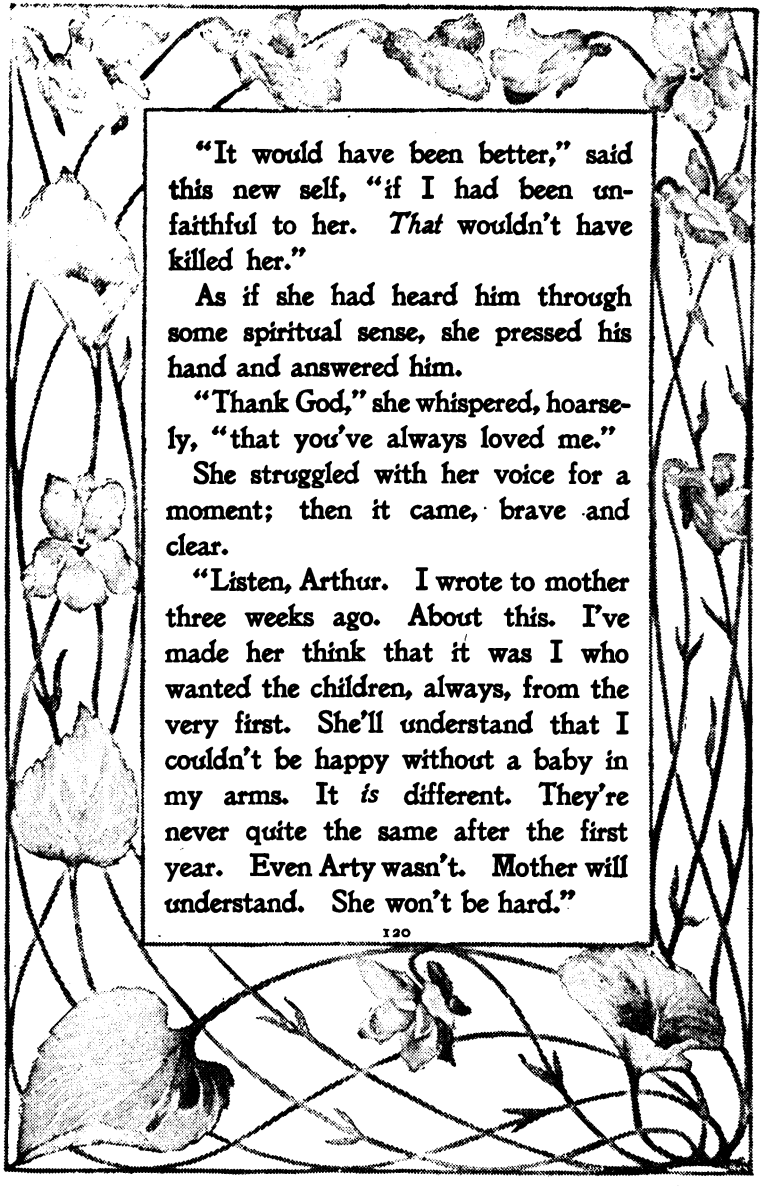
"The flannels," she said, "shall be washed and sent after you. You're not to worry."

She was providing still.

"Oh, Aggie—darling—don't."

"Why not? *You* ought to go to bed, because you'll have to get up so early to-morrow morning."

She closed her eyes, and he watched and waited through minutes that were hours. It seemed to him that it was another man than he who waited and watched. He was estranged from his former self, the virtuous, laborious self that he had once known, moving in its dull and desolate routine. Thoughts came to him, terrible, abominable thoughts that could never have occurred to it.



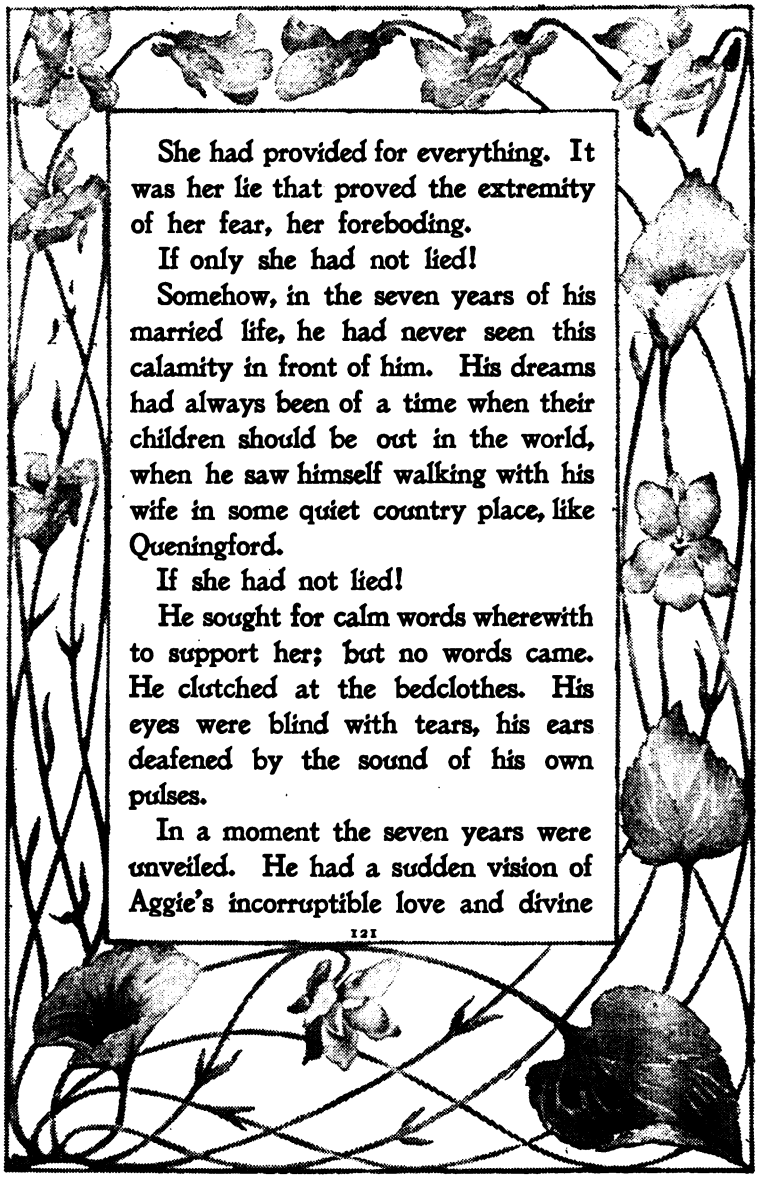
"It would have been better," said this new self, "if I had been unfaithful to her. *That* wouldn't have killed her."

As if she had heard him through some spiritual sense, she pressed his hand and answered him.

"Thank God," she whispered, hoarsely, "that you've always loved me."

She struggled with her voice for a moment; then it came, brave and clear.

"Listen, Arthur. I wrote to mother three weeks ago. About this. I've made her think that it was I who wanted the children, always, from the very first. She'll understand that I couldn't be happy without a baby in my arms. It *is* different. They're never quite the same after the first year. Even Arty wasn't. Mother will understand. She won't be hard."



She had provided for everything. It was her lie that proved the extremity of her fear, her foreboding.

If only she had not lied!

Somehow, in the seven years of his married life, he had never seen this calamity in front of him. His dreams had always been of a time when their children should be out in the world, when he saw himself walking with his wife in some quiet country place, like Queningford.

If she had not lied!

He sought for calm words wherewith to support her; but no words came. He clutched at the bedclothes. His eyes were blind with tears, his ears deafened by the sound of his own pulses.

In a moment the seven years were unveiled. He had a sudden vision of Aggie's incorruptible love and divine

tenderness before his grief closed over him.

Her eyes were resting upon his.

"I'm not afraid," she said; "not the least little bit. I'd rather you went away to-morrow. I don't—mind—being left."

But when to-morrow came it was he who was left.

He was sitting in the room underneath Aggie's. He had a pen in his hand, and his mind was unusually calm and clear. He had just telegraphed to his brother that he couldn't go—because Aggie was dead. Now he was trying to write to Aggie's mother to tell her to come—because Aggie was dead.

He had a great many things to see to—because Aggie was dead.

All at once he raised his head; he listened; he started up with a groan

that was a cry, and went from the room.

Up-stairs in the nursery a child's voice was singing:

"'I saw a ship a-sailing, a-sailing on the sea,
And it was full of pretty things—for Baby —and for me.'"

THE END







